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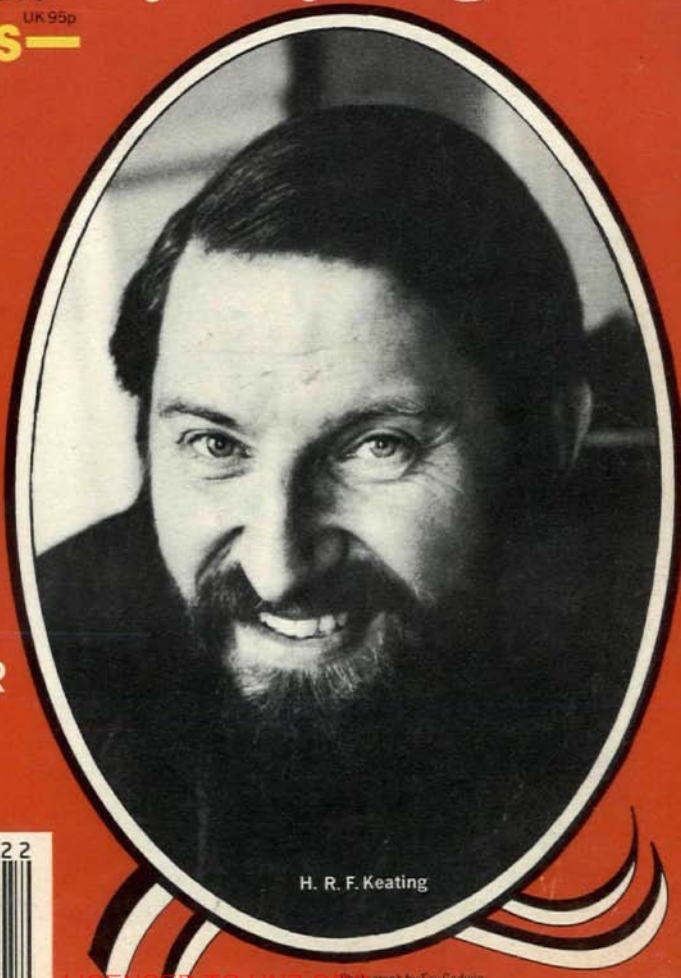

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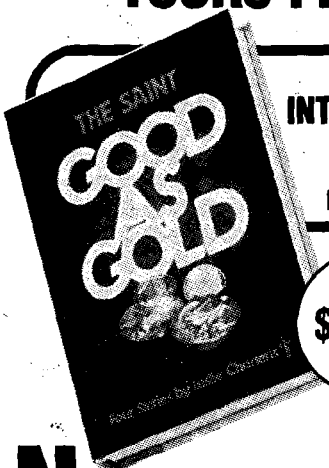

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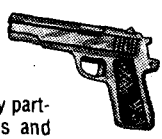

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ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine ®

TWO WEEKS EVERY SUMMER	Bill Pronzini	5
RAFFLES AND THE ARTFUL DODGER	Barry Perowne	12
RUFFLES VERSUS RUFFLES	Jon L. Breen	39
LOCAL JUSTICE	John H. Dirckx	47
HORN MAN	Clark Howard	54
THE LOCKED BATHROOM	H. R. F. Keating	66
THE FAIRY RING	John F. Suter	71
THE GIRL WHO SOLD MONEY	Dan J. Marlowe	85
IT'S A LONG FLIGHT TO L.A.	John Storm Roberts	93
MURDER ON THE MAT	Mark Silverstein	107
HIDDEN SPRINGS	Barbara Callahan	115
A SENSE OF CRISIS	E. X. Ferrars	128
THE SPY WHO CAME BACK FROM THE DEAD	Edward D. Hoch	145
MYSTERY NEWSLETTER	Otto Penzler & Chris Steinbrunner	100
THE JURY BOX	Jon L. Breen	104

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"It's like a game, a dangerous game"...

TWO WEEKS EVERY SUMMER

by BILL PRONZINI

We found out how Webb Patterson spends his summer vacations when five of us regulars were jawing around the card table in the Cedarville firehouse one Saturday afternoon in early June.

We weren't firemen, at least not in the sense that we were on the town payroll. Cedarville was still too small to need or afford full-time civil employees, so resident volunteers had to supplement the services provided by the county. There were ten volunteer firemen and some of us always got together on Saturdays, mostly to play pinochle or just exercise our jaw muscles; there isn't much else to do in a small town on the weekends. Unless you've got a family, of course, but except for Ernie Boone, whose wife had a voice like a train whistle and a nosy-Parker for a mother, all of us regulars were either bachelors or widowers with grown kids.

This particular Saturday was a fine late-spring day, not too hot, not too breezy, with the scent of wildflowers and the first dusty hint of summer in the air. We had the main double doors open wide, and all the windows raised, so we could breathe that air and watch the townspeople passing by in the sunshine outside. We weren't doing much except talking; it was too nice a day to concentrate on card-playing.

The conversation got around to vacations when Aaron Cubbage, who owns the drugstore, said something about weather like this making him itch for a fishing pole and a spot under one of the oaks at Lake Keystone. He went up to the lake for a couple of weeks every summer with a crony of his from the county seat and spent the whole time fishing for blue gills and drinking wine coolers; he'd been doing that for 30 years and he'd keep on doing it until he died.

The rest of us varied our vacations, though. Ernie Boone said he and the missus planned to close up their hardware store on the Fourth of July and take a trip through the Ozark Mountains. If his

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mother-in-law insisted on going along, he said, he'd keep driving until he found somebody to trade her to for a jug of mountain dew—which got a pretty good laugh. Doc Pollard, Cedarville's only dentist, said he was thinking about taking one of those nostalgic paddlewheel steamboat trips down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. I said that if the town could get along without the Holloway Floral and Gardening Service for three weeks, I was going to pack up my camper and drive over and up into Colorado. I'd never seen the Sangre de Cristo range, or any other part of that state, and I like to visit new places every year.

Webb Patterson, who doubled as Cedarville's lawyer and notary public, was the only one who didn't volunteer any information about his vacation plans. Not that his reticence was surprising; Webb had been a quiet and sort of private fellow for as long as I'd known him, which was since he'd moved to Cedarville from downstate four years ago. Not secretive, just private. Like the rest of us, he seemed pretty much content with the kind of quiet small-town life he led; but unlike the rest of us, he never talked about getting away for a while in the summer, seeing other parts of the state or country. Yet he always left town for two weeks in July or August, and he'd admitted to a visit to Mexico last year.

It was Doc Pollard who asked him straight out what he was planning to do this summer. At first Webb didn't answer. But the rest of us were looking at him, waiting, and finally he said in a reluctant voice, "I'm going to New York."

"New York City, you mean?" Doc asked.

"Yes."

"Never had any urge to go to New York myself," Aaron said. "I don't like big cities—too much noise and hubbub. And too much crime. Why, I heard they mug you right on the downtown streets in Manhattan."

Webb smiled at that, a funny sort of smile. "I'm sure that's an exaggeration."

"Maybe so, but I'll take my vacation at Lake Keystone, thank you."

I said, "You going to stay in New York the whole two weeks, Webb?"

"Yes, probably."

"What's there to do all that time? I mean, you can visit the Empire State Building and the United Nations and take in all the other sights in three or four days—a week at the most."

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"There are other things I plan to do."

"Mind saying what they are?"

He hesitated. "Well . . . walking in Central Park, for one."

"That doesn't sound like much of an interesting vacation," Ernie said, "walking around Central Park all day."

Webb hesitated again, longer this time. Then in an impulsive way, as if he had something inside him that needed to come out, he said, "Not all day, Ernie."

"Well, part of it, then."

"Not during the day at all. At night."

Ernie looked startled. "At night? Hey, you're not serious, are you? Central Park's supposed to be full of muggers at night."

"I'm sure it is," Webb said. "That's the idea."

"What idea?"

"The danger. Danger's the whole purpose of my vacation."

We were all staring at him—and in a different way now, like maybe we didn't know him as well as we thought we did. He was dead-serious, you could see that; he wasn't trying to pull our legs.

"Now wait a minute," I said. "You mean you're fixing to walk around Central Park at night *hoping* you'll meet up with a mugger?"

"No. Hoping I won't meet one."

Aaron said, "That doesn't make any sense."

"It does if you look at it a certain way," Webb said. "It's like a game, a dangerous game where you stack the odds against yourself and then try to beat them."

"Why in hell would you want to play such a game?"

"For the danger, the excitement."

"But you could get yourself *killed*!"

"I know. Personal risk is what the game is all about."

"This is crazy," Ernie said. He scooted his chair back a little way, as if he were afraid Webb might start foaming at the mouth and try to attack him; Ernie always did have a tendency to overreact. "This is the craziest damn thing I ever heard."

Webb sighed and seemed to stare for a time at the movement of dust motes in a shaft of sunlight. "I shouldn't have told you," he said finally. "I should have known better than to tell anyone."

"It doesn't change anything," I said. "Why should it? We're still your friends."

"But you don't understand or approve, I can see that."

"Give us a little time for it to sink in."

"And some more explanation," Doc said. "What made you all of

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a sudden decide on this game of yours?"

"I didn't decide all of a sudden. I decided it was how I would spend my vacations nine years ago, after my wife passed away."

"Nine years ago?" Aaron said. "My God, you mean you been going to places like New York, challenging muggers, every summer for *nine years*?"

"No, of course not. I choose a different kind of danger each year. Last summer I went backpacking alone in northern Mexico, in rugged country where there are supposed to be bandits. Two years ago I hunted wild boar with a bow and arrow up in Canada. Three years ago I rode a kayak down the Colorado River. Before it was shark-hunting in the Atlantic and some tamer things such as mountain climbing and motorcycle racing."

I said, "Each year, you do something a little more dangerous than the past year, is that it?"

"Yes."

Doc was incredulous. "And you survived all those things without getting hurt?"

"I survived them, yes," Webb said, "but I've been hurt a few times. A rattlesnake bit me on the leg in Mexico last summer; I almost drowned twice in the Colorado River; I broke an arm and fractured my pelvis mountain climbing in Arizona the year before I moved here."

"Crazy," Ernie muttered again. "Just plain crazy."

Webb gave him a tolerant glance. "Not from where I sit," he said. "Risking my life for two weeks every summer is what makes living worthwhile."

"I don't follow that," Aaron said.

"It's simple, really. I was born and raised in a town not much larger than Cedarville and I've never lived anywhere other than a small town; I like the quiet, slow-paced existence. But after my wife died, life didn't seem to mean much to me any more; for the first time I was *aware* of how dull and unexciting it was. And that feeling got even worse when the time came for me to plan my first vacation alone in twenty years. Where was I going to go? What was I going to do?

"Well, that started me thinking about the whole idea of a vacation. Most people, particularly in the big cities, lead hectic lives—exciting lives in the sense that they're always doing rush-about things, facing little dangers and crises every day that build up a considerable pressure after a while. A vacation for them is two or three quiet and

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unexciting weeks, a time to relax and unwind so they can go back to their normal lifestyle with recharged batteries. But for me, I realized, it was just the opposite. I lived fifty quiet and unexciting weeks and what I needed to recharge *my* batteries was two weeks of excitement and physical danger."

"So that's how it is," I said. "And it works for you, this kind of vacation?"

"Oh, yes. I've never felt more alive than I have these past nine years."

"And you keep doing more and more dangerous things every year," Aaron said. "Hell, man, the odds are bound to catch up with you sooner or later. And when they do you might not come home from one of your vacations."

Webb said quietly, "Don't you think I know that? But it doesn't matter. This is the only way I can live my life now and be happy and fulfilled. When my luck runs out and my time comes, I won't have any regrets."

None of us seemed to have anything more to say after that and there was one of those long uneasy silences where everybody is wrapped up in his own thoughts. Outside there were traffic sounds and the whoop of kids playing baseball in the park behind the firehouse; but inside the hush was so heavy the air might have been muffled in wool. You could almost hear the flies walking across the sun-streaked card table.

It was Webb who broke the silence. He scraped back his chair and stood up with a kind of rueful smile lifting the corners of his mouth. "I guess I'd best be going," he said. "I've got some law work to catch up on at home."

He didn't have any work to catch up on; he never worked on weekends, or brought business home from the office. I said, "Can't it wait, Webb? I'll walk over to Beebe's Store and buy us a six-pack—a cold beer'd go good in this weather."

"No, Roy, thanks. I'd better go."

He nodded to us, turned past old Number 4, Cedarville's lone fire engine, and went out into the sunshine. We all watched him until he was out of sight, not saying anything. But it was a different kind of silence now, no longer heavy, as if a kind of tension had been broken. At length Ernie said, "Well, what in hell do you think of that? What in *hell* do you think of that?"

"Not much," I said. "A man's entitled to do what he pleases on his vacation, isn't he?"

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"But challenging muggers," Aaron said, "risking his life for kicks—"

"He doesn't do it for kicks, Ernie."

"Well, that's what I call it."

Doc said, "Maybe he doesn't do it for kicks and maybe he's got every right to do it no matter what. But I'll tell you this: I wish he hadn't told us about it."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't help but feel different towards him now. He's still my friend, I don't mean that; but I just don't feel the same, knowing about these vacations of his." Doc shook his head and smacked the card table with his palm. "Damn, it would have been better for all of us if he'd kept his mouth shut."

"You're right about that, Doc," I said with some tartness. "A man's always better off to keep his private business to himself, if he doesn't want to be misunderstood or poorly thought of."

Later that day, after I got home from the firehouse, I laid out my road maps of Kansas and Colorado and studied the route I had traced out for my own vacation next month. I still wasn't sure of where I would stop in Colorado, but I'd circled four towns near the southern section of the Sangre de Cristo range that looked to have good state and county road connections. At least one of them, I thought, would be large enough to support a bank.

That was what I'd definitely decided on for this year: a bank in Colorado.

It was a matter of progression, just as it was with Webb. I'd started with a gas station in Minnesota five years ago and worked my way up through a liquor store in Iowa, a mercantile establishment in South Dakota, a supermarket in Nebraska, and a finance company in Kansas. So this year it just *had* to be a bank in Colorado.

Of course, that made next year's vacation problematical; a bank is just about the limit one man alone can handle. But then, there was no use worrying about next summer until after this one was history. Besides which, I had a notion it was about time to shift gears anyway, to try something new. I'd been doing some reading on Yellow Kid Weil, the Sanctimonious Kid, and other legendary confidence men; maybe I'd try something in their line. Not over in Europe or any place like that, though. There were still plenty of places I'd never visited in this country, still plenty of things to do right here.

Like they say, "See America First."

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I thought again about Webb—what a coincidence it was, considering the size of Cedarville, for one of my friends and neighbors to have developed a philosophy so similar to my own. Or was it really such a coincidence at that? After all, there had to be thousands of fellows living quiet, unexciting lives in hundreds of other small towns from coast to coast. Could be, couldn't it, that there were quite a few of us who spent our summer vacations doing all sorts of unconventional and dangerous things?

It was sure something to wonder about . . .

DETECTIVERSE

CRIME OF OMISSION

by RILEY HUGHES

Both sticks and stones
Can fracture bones
But words, I've read, cannot.
Some words *unsaid*
Can strike you dead:
"Don't touch. That wire's hot."

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a *NEW* Raffles novelet by

BARRY PEROWNE

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RAFFLES AND THE ARTFUL DODGER

by BARRY PEROWNE

On a winter evening, cold and misty, A. J. Raffles and I happened to be walking along Pall Mall, London's street of influential clubs. Raffles was a member of one of them and had invited me to dine with him there.

Dimly visible in the mist, a man walking not far ahead of us was approaching a porch from which faint gaslight emanated.

"That's the porch of the club," Raffles said, "and that man who's obviously going there is the club's most senior member, General Sir Giles Bamford, a retired governor of one of the old penal settlements in Australia."

Walking up the club's steps, the retired governor entered the premises.

Tall but indistinct in the mist, another man crossed the street from the opposite side. He walked up the steps, and I thought he

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went into the club, but Raffles suddenly put a hand on my arm.

"He's not gone in," Raffles said. "That's odd. He's peering in through the glass panels of the swing-doors."

Vaguely, I could discern the man, a motionless shadow.

"Either he's trying to make out what place Sir Giles has gone into," Raffles said, "or he's trying to see if the old man's meeting someone there."

The man in the porch came back down the steps and walked on into the mist.

"I'm going to see if I can find out who that chap is," Raffles said. "Wait for me in the club."

He walked on quickly and was lost in the mist.

Taken aback by his abrupt departure, there was nothing I could do except what he had told me. I went on into the club.

"Good evening, sir," said the hall porter.

"Good evening," I replied. "My name is Manders. I have an appointment with Mr. Raffles."

"He's not in the club at the moment, sir. Perhaps you'd care to leave your outdoor things with me and take a chair."

Leaving my ulster and topper with the porter, I walked across the mellow old gaslit hall, then stood warming my hands at the glow of logs burning genially in the wide fireplace.

Thanks to his growing reputation as a gamesplayer of skill and a gentleman of independent means, Raffles had been a member of this club for quite a while, but I had not myself set foot in it until now.

Over the fireplace was a portrait of the late Mr. Charles Dickens, and elsewhere on the walls of the hall were portraits of other past or present members of the club, all famous men.

Wandering around, looking at the portraits, I could well imagine the stupefaction of the club's committee if its members were ever to learn as much about A. J. Raffles as was known to myself, his confederate, or to his invaluable "fence," Ivor Kern.

But I was preoccupied by the incident that had just occurred, and I wondered what was happening out there in the mist. In the hall here it was very quiet. The porter, behind his counter, sat reading a newspaper. On the wall above his oaken lair a clock ticked. Occasionally, a cabhorse clipclopped by along Pall Mall. Time was passing. I was beginning to grow uneasy.

Suddenly the swing-doors to the street were thrust open. To my relief, Raffles strode in.

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" 'Evening, Whittle," he said, taking off his outdoor things. "I believe Sir Giles Bamford's here."

"Yes, sir," said the porter, "the General's upstairs in the dining-room. And, Mr. Raffles, there's a Mr. Manders waiting for you."

"So I see." Immaculate, his dark hair crisp, his keen face tanned, a pearl in his cravat, Raffles crossed the hall to me. "Come on, Bunny."

"What happened?" I asked, as we went up the handsome staircase.

"I fluffed it, Bunny. The chap sensed me following him. He walks with a slight stiffness of the right knee, but he suddenly quickened his pace and nipped into that alley that goes through from Pall Mall to the back of the St. James's Theatre. I took a prowl along the alley but there's only one gaslamp in it and, what with the mist, I lost track of the blighter."

"D'you intend to tell Sir Giles of the incident?"

"I think not, Bunny. He doesn't often come to London, but I've played cards with him at the club here. I don't want to worry the old boy, but I want to know if he's going out after dinner."

"And if he is?"

"You and I'll not be far behind—keeping our eyes open."

In the dining-room, where few of the tables were occupied, I followed Raffles to one at which an old gentleman, small of stature but very erect, with a bald head, pink cheeks, and a white moustache, was dining alone. A monocle dangled from the lapel of his tweed knickerbocker suit.

"Why, Sir Giles," Raffles said, "it's good to see you in town again! May I introduce my friend Manders?"

Excusing himself from shaking hands, the small General grimaced at the mittens he was wearing.

"Gout, damn it," he said. "You and your friend dinin', Raffles? Club's very empty to-night. I'm half-way through dinner, but sit down, join me."

"We don't see you here often enough, sir," Raffles said, when he had placed the order for our own dinner.

"I never come to London in winter, if I can help it," said Sir Giles, "but I've got to keep an appointment to-morrow mornin' about my Dickensiana."

"Your Dickensiana, sir?" said Raffles.

Seeing our interest, Sir Giles told us that long ago, before he went out to Australia, he had known Charles Dickens as a fellow member of this club.

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"He's been dead twenty-one years now," Sir Giles said. "He died in 1870, when you young fellers had barely begun to learn the alphabet. But many's the time I've heard Dickens propose his favourite toast at Saturday night jollifications in this very dinin'-room. All of a sudden he'd stand up—bearded feller, he was, with a fine brow on him—and he'd rap for attention. 'Gentlemen, a toast,' he'd say, holdin' up his glass, *'to Absent Friends!'* And he meant it, too. He spoke from the heart, Dickens did. He certainly kept *me* in mind in all the years I was absent in Australia—'Down Under,' as they say."

As his books came out, Dickens had never failed, Sir Giles told us, to send him a copy of each one, personally inscribed.

"He knew how I prized 'em," Sir Giles said. "He took the trouble to get me the artists' original drawings of some of the illustrations in the books, and he even sent me his manuscript of one of 'em. 'Who knows, my dear Bamford,' he wrote me, 'you may find these things a nest egg worth selling in your old age.' "

Sir Giles shook his bald head.

"Well, I'm an old man now," he said, "but of course I'd never *sell* my collection of Dickensiana. I've given it all away."

"Given it away, sir?" Raffles said, with an incredulity I fully shared.

"I had my reasons," Sir Giles said sombrely. "A year or so ago I presented my Dickensiana to a museum in South Kensington. The museum director, Dr. Spencer Turnell, has been keepin' the collection in the museum's vaults till he had room to display it. He's now put it on view and he's been pressin' me to approve his arrangements, which is why I'm in London. I've got an appointment with him in the mornin', eleven-thirty. I'm lunchin' with him at the museum, then I'll be off back to Norfolk. Gout permittin', I'll be doin' a bit of shootin' with my old spaniel Bess on the fens around my place. How about joinin' us for the week-end, Raffles—helpin' us put a bit of fur and feather in my cook's game larder? Bring your friend Manders, if he'd care to come."

"Why, General," Raffles said, "we'd be delighted—eh, Bunny?"

"Absolutely, Raffles," I said.

"Capital," said Sir Giles. "I'll expect you the day after to-morrow. Catch the train that gets to King's Lynn at one p.m. and I'll meet you at the station."

He rose, as did we, and Raffles asked casually, "Are you going out, sir?"

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"In this mist?" said the small General. "Not me! I've taken a room at the club here for the night. I'm off up to bed."

He left the dining-room. We resumed our seats.

"Bunny," Raffles said, "where Sir Giles goes in the morning, the man who was spying on him may also go."

That seemed a possibility, so at ten-thirty in the morning, an hour before Sir Giles Bamford was due to keep his appointment, Raffles and I passed through a revolving-door into a South Kensington museum devoted to the Arts of Mankind.

The day being misty, the gasoliers in the grandiose lobby were brilliantly lighted, and the first thing we saw was a notice stating that visitors to the museum were required to deposit their walking-sticks, umbrellas, reticules, or other hand-baggage at the Cloaks Counter before passing through the turnstiles.

Of these there were two, set in a barrier that bisected the lobby. Each turnstile was attended by a man in the museum's police-blue uniform with small silver crowns on the collar, and from the attendant at the turnstile through which we clicked Raffles purchased a *Guide to the Museum.* The brochure contained a plan showing the lay-out of the building, and Raffles pointed out to me on the plan a second-floor room designated as:

> Room 28. DICKENSIANA. This unique collection was presented to the Museum by General Sir Giles Bamford, K.B.

Watchful for visitors, we sauntered through the ground-floor rooms.

Spacious and lofty, rich in ornaments of enduring beauty, the rooms connected with one another by arched doorways. At each doorway stood a vigilant male attendant. On the tall windows were steel grilles. In the brooding hush of the splendid rooms our footfalls faintly echoed.

Museums being chilly places on winter mornings, we saw no visitors at all until we went up a marble staircase to the second floor. Facing us along the landing was a doorway with the numeral 28 above the lintel, and talking earnestly to the male attendant in the doorway was a visitor of fashionably hour-glass figure. Becomingly hatted and costumed, with gloves of red lace, she was gesturing emphatically with her copy of the museum *Guide,* but at our approach she broke off her conversation.

Emerging from Room 28, she swept past us with a rustle of bustled skirts, her chin in the air.

"A most attractive young Dickensian, Bunny," Raffles murmured.

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She had left us Room 28 all to ourselves, except for the attendant at the doorway. The room was quite small, gaslit, without windows. In glass-fronted bookcases were first editions of many of Dickens's books, and in specimen-cases were letters written by him to Sir Giles.

On the panelled walls of the room hung framed illustrations, originals. Among the persons depicted were the amiable Mr. Pickwick and the fallacious Mr. Jingle; the miserly Scrooge and the crippled child Tiny Tim; the magnificently bankrupt Mr. Micawber and the fawning hypocrite Uriah Heep; the murderous Bill Sikes and the wistful orphan Oliver Twist—and many other characters whose names and appearances the genius of Charles Dickens had made universally familiar.

"What a man!" I thought. "What a heritage he left to the world!"

Drawing aside a green baize cover on the glass top of a brass-locked specimen-case, Raffles disclosed the Dickens manuscript of which Sir Giles had told us. Under the glass the leather-bound volume lay open at a yellowed page numbered 117. Marred by a small stain as from the candle-grease of inspired midnights, the handwriting, in ink, was small, slanting to the right, the lines crowded closely together, with few scratchings-out or ballooned insertions.

"Sir Giles'll be here soon," Raffles murmured, drawing the baize cover back over the glass. "We don't want him to think we're prying. Come on." Leaving the Dickens room, we prowled through other rooms in the grandiose building, but saw no visitors who conceivably could have been the spy on the club porch the previous night.

We left the museum, having drawn a blank, and when we stepped from the train at King's Lynn station, at one p.m. on the morrow, I expected to see Sir Giles Bamford, but there was no sign of the small General. His absence troubled me.

I said, misgiving stealing over me, "Sir Giles was supposed to be here to meet us."

"Be careful," Raffles said quietly. "Keep a poker face."

I saw then that coming directly towards us along the station platform was a tall stranger. He wore topboots, a caped grey great-coat, a brown billycock hat. He walked with a slight but unmistakable stiffness of the right knee.

With an effort, for my heart was suddenly thumping, I kept a poker face as the man halted before us, touching two fingers to his hatbrim.

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"Mr. Raffles and Mr. Manders?" he asked.

"We are indeed," Raffles said pleasantly, "and who're you?"

"Kibbe, sir—General Sir Giles Bamford's coachman. He sent me to get your luggage. He's with his spaniel in the dogcart in the stytion yard. This w'y, gentlemen."

The tall coachman, wiry, long in the arm, with a sallow, saturnine face framed by iron-grey sideburns, took up our valises. Carrying our own guncases, we accompanied him along the platform to the ticket-collector's barrier.

"After the mists and coal-smoke of London, Bunny, it's a treat to breathe country air," Raffles remarked. "D'you know London at all, Kibbe?"

"No, sir," said the coachman.

Fleetingly, I met Raffles' grey eyes, and I knew he was thinking, as I was, that it was strange that Kibbe did not know London, for who but a Cockney, born within sound of Bow Bells, said "stytion" for "station" and "w'y" for "way"?

As well as his slight limp, Coachman Kibbe had given us further food for thought as we went with him out to the station yard where the small General and his elderly liver-and-white spaniel were waiting in a yellow-wheeled dogcart. Sir Giles greeted us cordially, as did his spaniel Bess, who obviously knew what our guncases were for and so fully approved of our visit.

Kibbe climbed to his driving-seat and, taking the reins, gave the good-looking bay mare a crack of his whip. We clattered off through the quiet old streets of King's Lynn, out into the flat landscape of the fens.

Low-lying, threaded by reed-edged streams, the fenlands stretched away bleakly to the grey horizon.

"I've got ground-game and wildfowl rights over these fens," said Sir Giles. "We'll see what Bess can find for us to-morrow—my gout permittin'."

He flexed his gloved trigger-finger experimentally.

Kibbe reined the mare off the turnpike onto the frozen ruts of a byroad with a fingerpost marked: Wyventhorpe 2m—Thorpe Hall 3½m. The dogcart splashed through the thin-iced puddles between the thatched cottages of Wyventhorpe village. We clattered over a crumbling stone bridge that arched a willow-fringed stream.

"Had many a trout out of that stream, haven't we, Bess?" said Sir Giles, patting his spaniel. "Ah, here we are, home at last! We're about an hour's drive here, from King's Lynn, my dear fellers."

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A hobbledehoy lad with ginger hair and enormous boots came running out of a stables to open a white-painted gate for us.

"Well done, Brown," called Sir Giles, as the dogcart clattered through the gateway, to the grins and forehead-knucklings of the youthful ostler.

Gravel crunched under the wheels of the dogcart. Over the doors of the stabling, to our right, was a gabled window half-obscured by ivy, and I wondered if the window were that of the enigmatic Coachman Kibbe's abode, for coachmen customarily lived over the stables.

The driveway led around the side of the house to where Kibbe reined in the mare before the front-door steps. A rambling old Jacobean building, Thorpe Hall faced south over frosted lawns to the desolate vista of the fens. Already the brief daylight of the winter afternoon was beginning to fade, but in the low-ceilinged, oak-beamed rooms to which the small General hospitably conducted Raffles and myself, coal fires burned cosily and copper warming-pans made humps under the eiderdowns of the fourposter beds.

"They're old-fashioned beds but they keep the Norfolk draughts out," said Sir Giles. "You wouldn't find beds like these in Australia, fine country as it is, a great nation in the makin' nowadays. Many's the time I've wished I'd stayed Down Under. In comin' back to England I made the mistake of my life. But so it goes, eh, what? Anyway, my dear fellers, I've got two little parlourmaids, Effie and Lottie, so just ring for anything you want. Come on down when you've unpacked and there'll be drinks waitin'."

Which of the young parlourmaids was Effie and which was Lottie did not become clear to me at dinner that night. I was surprised to find that, in waiting on Sir Giles, Raffles, and myself at table, the maids were supervised by none other than Coachman Kibbe.

His coachman's livery discarded in favour of a starched shirt, striped trousers, and a tailcoat, a napkin over his arm, he evidently doubled at Thorpe Hall in the role of butler.

I thought this very odd. Fascinated by his versatility, I kept a sidelong eye on the tall, sinewy fellow with his stubble of iron-grey hair and his bushy sideburns. Attentive as acolytes upon a bishop, the two little parlourmaids, fresh-faced country girls in starched caps and aprons, stood one each side of the lofty Kibbe as, at a monstrous sideboard, he ladled soup from a dented silver tureen.

Carrying the soup-plates shyly to us, Effie and Lottie, whichever was which, hastened back to the side of their mentor, seeming anxious to miss no word of instruction he muttered to them out of the

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side of his sardonic mouth. From time to time the serving-hatch to the kitchen was slid open and I glimpsed in the aperture the mobcap and round face, flushed as a harvest moon, of Sir Giles's elderly female cook-housekeeper, as at Kibbe's behest she passed through to him the successive courses.

Admirably cooked, these consisted of a baked carp garnished with thyme and parsley, a pair of Norfolk capons roasted and stuffed, and a saddle of lamb done on the spit and well basted. It was straightforward country-house fare, no fancy kickshaws.

Kibbe dealt with the wine himself. For all his stiff knee, he moved with a silent suppleness, and I found the sudden shaking of his long arm over my shoulder, to keep my wineglass topped up, curiously disturbing. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him take a peculiar liberty. Honing his carving-knife on a steel, he elicited a slight squeak from Effie or Lottie, whichever it was, by suddenly plucking a hair from her head to test the blade-edge before he plunged it into the saddle of lamb.

I stole a glance at Raffles. I fancied that he, too, had noticed the incident, but Sir Giles had not. In vintage evening-dress, monocle dangling from his lapel, he was sitting with his back to the sideboard. His table talk was mostly of fenland sport and the prowess of his spaniel Bess. He still was wearing his mittens but, as we finished dinner with a savoury of anchovies and chopped artichokes on toast, he flexed his trigger finger and announced that he was pretty sure he would be able to shoot with us to-morrow.

"Gout comes and goes," he said. "Kibbe?"

"Sir?" Napkin over his arm, Kibbe came to the table.

"I'll take Mr. Raffles and Mr. Manders to shoot the Withy Pond fen in the mornin'," said Sir Giles. "Bring the dogcart to the door at nine a.m."

"I'll be gone by then, sir," said Kibbe.

"Eh?" said Sir Giles. "Gone?"

"You give me time off," said Kibbe. "Compassionate leave."

For a moment they eyed each other, the tall manservant impassive, the small General with his bald head turning slowly roseate.

"Very well," he muttered, "have the stable lad see to it when he comes in the mornin'. Raffles, Manders, come, my dear fellers, we'll have coffee in the billiard room."

The versatile Kibbe seemed somehow to have disturbed Sir Giles. In the billiard room he stood gazing down at the log fire, his mittened hands clasping and unclasping behind his back. He did not turn as

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a timid knock on the door preceded the entry of Lottie, or it may have been Effie, bearing a tray of coffee things and liqueur decanters. She put it on a side table. Raffles thanked her with a smile. Blushing, the pretty maid bobbed a bashful curtsey and backed from our presence, closing the door reverently after her.

"By the way, Sir Giles," Raffles said, taking a billiard cue from the rack, "I notice that your man Kibbe has a stiff knee."

"Kick from the mare," Sir Giles said absently, "when he was harnessin' her the other day."

"Is that so?" said Raffles, chalking his cue. "Oddly enough, Manders and I saw that limp of Kibbe's in Pall Mall the night before last. I don't want to worry you, sir, but I think perhaps you should know that Kibbe was spying on you. We saw him at it."

The small General turned. He looked as if he had been hit by a bombshell.

" 'Compassionate leave,' " he said bitterly. "I give him no such thing. He *takes* it! He absents himself as he pleases, sometimes for a day or two, sometimes for weeks on end. He has the gall to call his mysterious damned absences 'compassionate leave.' "

Sir Giles went to the tray on the side table and with a shaking hand splashed brandy into a glass.

"Spyin' on me, was he? H'm! Just before I went up to London, I had a flamin' row with Kibbe. I'd caught him tryin' to seduce one of my young parlourmaids, get her to sneak out at night and go up the ladder with him to his room over the stables. By God, I told Kibbe I'd put up with his doin's a damned sight too long. I didn't tell him I was goin' to the museum. I told him I was goin' to London to consult Scotland Yard about him. If he followed me to London, spyin' on me, I reckon it was to see if I carried out my threat—though he knew what it would mean to myself."

"To *yourself,* sir?" Raffles said.

The small General flushed deeply. His moustache looked whiter. He took a gulp of his brandy.

"Look here, you fellers," he said, "you're guests under my roof. I take it you'll treat as a confidence anything I may tell you?"

"That goes without saying," Raffles replied.

Sir Giles drew in his breath. "I didn't go the Yard about Kibbe. God knows, I had plenty of reasons to do it, but—" From the pocket of his dinner-coat the small General took a worn-looking foolscap envelope. "I keep this on my person—for safety." From the envelope he took a paper, unfolded it, and laid it on the green baize of the

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billiard table. "This is the last gift I had from Charles Dickens."

The light of the green-shaded oil-lamps pendent over the table shone down on to an illustration, an original in black-and-white.

"D'you recognise this character?" Sir Giles said.

Raffles and I nodded. The character portrayed was as well-known to the world as any of the other Dickensian characters whose likenesses we had seen hanging on the walls of Room 28 in the museum.

"Now read this," said Sir Giles Bamford. His mittened hands shook as he took from the envelope another paper and unfolded it. "This is the last letter I received from Dickens—written by him in the summer of 1868."

He laid the letter on the table. I recognised the handwriting at once. Written on the notepaper of the club in Pall Mall, the letter read:

My dear Bamford,

The windjammer *Colonel Macquarie* dropped anchor in the Pool of London on Tuesday, 30th ult., bringing a cargo of Australian wool and your esteemed letter, to which I reply instanter.

No, Bamford, the ticket-of-leave convict Leonard Handy who, you tell me, "claims that in his boyhood he had known Charles Dickens," is not pulling the longbow.

Though the meeting occurred thirty years ago, I've every reason to remember it. I was working on my second book at the time and was striving to keep up with its publication in monthly parts.

To check up on a detail, I dropped in at a London Magistrate's Court. A trial (save the mark!) was in progress. In the dock, charged with being "incorrigible malefactors," their records of previous convictions read out in a foghorn voice by the Clerk of Sessions, were a dozen or so poverty-stricken prisoners, male and female, among them a pickpocketing urchin of about nine years of age, if that.

Arbitrarily, these poor souls were sentenced *en bloc* to be transported in custody to the Australian penal settlements, the sentence being applicable, in the case of each of the prisoners, "for the term of his natural life."

I contrived to have a word with the urchin, and press a few sovereigns into his grubby little manacled hands, before he was carted off in the Black Maria with the adult "criminals" to the prison ship at anchor in the Thames.

The urchin's name was Leonard Handy. I was struck by the wry, resilient, Cockney defiance with which he received the iniquitous sentence upon him. I could not get him out of my mind.

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I have obtained, and I send you with this letter, the artist's notion of Handy as I described him when, almost immediately, I wrote him into *Oliver Twist* in the character of "Jack Dawkins, the Artful Dodger," ringleader of the gang of juvenile pickpockets in that book.

As Sir Giles turned the letter, which continued overpage, the lights above the billiard table shone down brightly onto the illustration—the urchin Artful Dodger, impudently grinning, barefoot and in rags, a battered tophat perched aslant on his head as he thumbed his nose in defiance at the magisterial guardians of a smug society. Overpage, the letter continued:

To hear from you, Bamford, that the real-life "Artful Dodger" is now a grown man, a "lifer" on ticket-of-leave far away there in Australia, "Down Under," touches me deeply.

You say that, as a Dickensian, you feel that you "would like to do something for Handy." *Do* so! In your governorship capacity, you may well be in a position to make up, in some measure, for the bad start he had in life.

Meanwhile, my dear Bamford, I shall couple with your name, in my mind, the name of the real-life "Artful Dodger," next time I have occasion to propose that kindest of toasts—*"to Absent Friends!"*

Rest assured, old fellow, you are not forgotten at the club here in Pall Mall, least of all by

Ever Yours Sincerely,
Charles Dickens

"Two years after I received that letter," said Sir Giles, returning the letter and illustration to the envelope, and pocketing it, "Dickens was dead. I never saw him again. I was left with only my mementoes of him. But I'd made an addition to my collection of Dickensiana. I'd given Leonard Handy, the adult, real-life Artful Dodger, a job."

In Australia, the small General told us, he had been well served by Leonard Handy. He had seemed a reformed man, willing, respectful, industrious. But when at last the time came, a decade or more after the death of Dickens, for the small General to retire, and return to England, he had found himself in a quandary.

"That's when I made my big mistake," Sir Giles said bitterly. "Except in certain cases, which went on well into the 1860's, the bad old penal transportation days, with their bloody riots in the convict stockades—growin' pains of a virile nation in the makin'—were over. Even 'lifers' were at liberty in Australia on ticket-of-leave but, as far as returnin' to England was concerned, they had no right of entry. They remained 'prohibited persons.' "

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Like all born Cockneys, Leonard Handy had yearned for the sights and sounds of London, the clangour of Bow Bells over the smoking chimneypots, the crowds around the market barrows in Petticoat Lane, the costers in their pearlies talking in rhyming slang, the homely smells of the Ha'p'ny gin pubs, the jellied-eel stalls, and the gasometers on Hackney Marshes.

"He begged me to bring him home with me," said Sir Giles. "He'd suffered a gross injustice in his urchin days. 'Make up to him for his bad start in life,' Dickens had told me. It was the last wish I had from my old friend. I ask you fellers, how *could* I ignore it?"

"How indeed, sir?" said Raffles sympathetically, and I nodded agreement.

In his hands at the time, the small General told us, had been papers relating to a man named Walter Kibbe, who had died of thirst while trapping rabbits in the Outback for the Australian government bounty on pelts.

"I brought Leonard Handy back here to England," said the small General, "as my manservant—'Walter Kibbe.' I hadn't been back a year when I was summoned to Buckingham Palace. I knelt before the Queen, God bless her, to receive her accolade for my services Down Under. I rose from my knees Her Majesty's 'trusty and well-beloved subject, Giles Bamford, Knight.' " Sir Giles looked at us bleakly. "And I had broken the laws of her realm by bringin' into England, under false pretences, a prohibited person!"

It was quite a while, Sir Giles told us, before he began to realise the position in which he had placed himself.

"There's a sayin'," he told us, "that 'the boy is father to the man.' Gradually, I came to see that there's truth in that sayin'. I was deceived in my manservant."

Sir Giles mopped his flushed head as he told us that, little by little, the true nature of the real-life Artful Dodger had started to reveal itself. He had not changed since his days as an urchin pick-pocket. On the contrary, harsh experience in the convict stockades of the penal settlement had confirmed and hardened him in his dubious practices. He had learned a great deal in the stockades. He still was the Dodger, but a grown man—and infinitely more artful.

"He began to show his hand," said Sir Giles. "First, it was a sort of veiled insolence. Then I began to find he was takin' over my whole house. I was no longer master in it. Then these mysterious absences started—sometimes short, sometimes prolonged—these damned 'compassionate leaves' of his! On top of everythin' else, a year or so

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ago I started missin' items from my collection of Dickensiana. I knew who was responsible, of course. I knew I ought to go to Scotland Yard about him, ought to have done it years before. But I shrank, damn it, from havin' to confess my own crime in bringin' the feller into this country. Her Majesty might hear of it. Rather than have her know what I'd done behind her back, I—I'd blow my brains out!"

Instead, he had removed his collection from the reach of his long-armed manservant incubus.

"I presented the collection to that museum in South Kensington," Sir Giles said. "You know, he has the gall, on Sundays here, to act as one of the churchwardens at Wyventhorpe Parish Church! When I think that tall feller in a Sabbath frockcoat, with his bushy grey sidewhiskers, goin' round the pews with the offertory-plate, when I think he's a convict, the Artful Dodger, I—I can't sleep o' nights. Raffles, d'you think that, in common decency, I ought to resign from my clubs?"

"If I were you, sir," Raffles said, "I wouldn't take such a drastic step. True, the Dodger seems at present to hold the good cards. But, just possibly, Manders and I may be able to stiffen your hand with a trump or two—by finding out for you just *where* and *how* your versatile manservant spends his 'compassionate leaves.' "

I knew the look, the wicked vivacity, in Raffles' grey eyes. I sensed his exhilaration. For the small General's mistake in life, plus the kick of a bay mare, had brought into opposition two criminals adept in larceny—A. J. Raffles and the Artful Dodger.

We did not shoot the Withy Pond marshes next day. Instead, Raffles and I were on our way back to London, by train. We had a first-class compartment to ourselves.

"Bunny," Raffles said, "how much money have you got in your bank account?"

"About five hundred pounds, Raffles."

"That's about what I have in mine, Bunny. It may interest you to know that, at this moment, our friend the Dodger is worth more than ten times our combined capital!"

Raffles offered me a Sullivan from his cigarette-case. He told me that he had been up and dressed long before first light this morning, keeping his eyes open.

"I was not surprised," Raffles said, "to see Sir Giles's ingenious manservant lighting a bicycle lamp in the stable yard. He cycled off. It was then about half-past seven. It would take him about an hour to cycle to King's Lynn station. As soon as I saw the light of

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his bicycle lamp recede out of the stable yard, I took my bedroom candle and went out to the stables. It still was cold and dark. I found the fixed ladder that leads up to the trap door of the coachman's room over the stables. The trap door was secured by a strong padlock. I had a notion that the Artful Dodger probably made a good thing of his 'compassionate leaves.' I picked the padlock and searched his room—for evidence. I found it. In a *very* artful hiding-place I found eleven thousand pounds in banknotes."

"Oh, dear God!" I said.

"Naturally," Raffles said, "I left the hiding-place and the loot intact—till we know a bit more about what he's up to. I relocked the trap-door padlock and walked the mile and a half to Wyventhorpe village. I met that ginger-haired ostler lad, Brown, bicycling to work at Thorpe Hall. I walked on to the village and sent a telegram."

"How could you, at that hour of the morning? The post office wouldn't be open until nine a.m."

"I wrote the telegram on a bit of paper, Bunny, wrapped a sovereign up in it. The post office is also the village grocery shop. I pushed my telegram under the door, with a message asking the village postmistress please to send the telegram as soon as she opened, and to keep the change from the sovereign for herself."

"Who was the telegram to?"

"Our invaluable fence, Ivor Kern, asking him, in the code we use with him, to have one of his snoops meet all trains coming into London from King's Lynn and follow a tall man who walked with a stiff right knee. After all, Bunny, where else but London would a Cockney like the Artful Dodger spend his 'compassionate leaves'? Assuming that he caught a train from King's Lynn at about nine a.m., my telegram may have arrived in time for the train to be met as I instructed. In which case," Raffles said, "Kern may, just possibly, have news for us."

From the London terminus, when our train steamed in, we repaired posthaste in a hansom to Kern's antiques emporium in the King's Road, Chelsea. In the cluttered sitting-room over his shop, he told us that he had received the telegram. Not only that, but already he had had word from the snoop he had dispatched to the station.

"He's spotted your bloke with the stiff knee, Raffles," Kern said. "My snoop's sent me word by one of his runners, his whip-behind boys."

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"Whip-behind boys?" I said, puzzled.

"Cockney urchins," said Kern, with his cynical smile, "barefoot, ragged kids who get around London by sneaking rides on the rear bar of fourwheeler cabs. When some officious passer-by yells out to the cabbie, *'Whip behind!'*, the nippers jump off before the lash can reach 'em. Slippery as eels, they are. My snoop uses a couple of 'em as runners, to keep me informed. I may get further word from him any time now. While we're waiting, I'll have the Hong Kong Restaurant across the street send lunch over for us."

Shortly, an aproned waiter of inscrutably Oriental appearance came staggering up the stairs with a capacious basket. Chattering incomprehensibly in a high-pitched, protesting voice, he swept everything off the table, flung over it a starched white cloth, and in a twinkling covered it with bowls and saucers containing Hong Kong delicacies. Adding to the spread three pairs of chopsticks and a pot of China tea, he clattered off, still complaining stridently, down the stairs.

"He's highly strung," Kern explained to us.

During lunch we discussed the situation. Deftly snaring a fried prawn with his chopsticks, Raffles pointed out to me that in all probability the Artful Dodger knew of some buyer prepared to pay high for items of Dickensiana.

"So," Raffles said, "now that Sir Giles's collection is on display in the museum, it may well be that the Dodger has designs on the most valuable item—the Dickens manuscript. True, the museum—as we saw—takes stringent precautions against theft. But consider! In his urchin boyhood the Artful Dodger was ringleader of a gang of juvenile thieves. The quality of leadership is innate. It's an instinct, a gift, that develops with practice. As an adult, the Dodger may well be the leader—and the brains—of a gang of *adult* thieves."

This, Raffles suggested, would account for the Dodger's "compassionate leaves." In one identity, he was leader of a gang of London thieves. A coup completed, he then retreated artfully into his other identity, of which his gang probably knew nothing—his identity as Kibbe, coachman-butler at Thorpe Hall, Norfolk, and respected churchwarden at Wyventhorpe Parish Church.

"We've a lot to learn from the Artful Dodger, Bunny. He's a professional, and highly successful, as we may judge from the fortune he's got salted down in his room over Thorpe Hall stables. However," Raffles said, "he evidently fancies women—as we may infer from his attempt to seduce Effie."

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"It may have been Lottie," I pointed out.

"The inference remains valid in either case," Raffles said. "So it's logical to assume that in all likelihood the Artful Dodger has an attractive young woman or two in his gang of London thieves. And the only way that occurs to me, as a mere amateur in crime, likely to make possible the theft of the Dickens manuscript is by enlisting the help of an alluring woman."

"But, Raffles, how could a woman help?"

"By seducing from his duty, Bunny, the male attendant at Room 28 in the museum."

Kern interrupted suddenly, "Now, just a minute! You seem to be talking about Dickensiana. A while back, well over a year ago, a man came in here with some items of Dickensiana to sell. I guessed, from the look of the chap, that they were stolen, but I gave him a good price because I knew of a collector who'd pay high for Dickensiana, no questions asked. I did well out of the deal. The items were a couple of original illustrations of famous Dickens characters—the dandy, Pip, and the hallucinated spinster, Miss Havisham, from *Great Expectations*. I remember the illustrations well, they were genuine Cruikshanks. The tall fellow I bought them from had no limp, as I recall, but I bought some letters from him as well—letters written by Dickens, about London club life, to someone he called 'My dear Bamford.' I—"

Kern broke off. Raffles and I, astounded, were staring at him.

He said defensively, "Well, you don't imagine you two are the *only* crooks I do business with?"

Raffles said, with a wry smile, "It's a smaller world than I thought, the London crime world! Ivor, Bunny and I know where those items of Dickensiana came from. The man who sold them to you is himself a famous Dickens character. His real name's Leonard Handy. Dickens put him into a book under the name of Jack Dawkins, the Artful Dodger."

Kern's pale, intellectual face was a study. But at that moment a high-pitched, querulous chattering heralded the return of the waiter from the Hong Kong Restaurant. Seizing the four corners of the tablecloth, he heaved it up with everything on it, hurled it with a sound of smashing crockery into his basket, and protesting shrilly in his inscrutable way, took his departure.

The brief daylight of the winter afternoon was fading as Raffles explained to Kern the implications of the Artful Dodger situation. Through the window I could see the mist of evening creeping along

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the King's Road. Wanly, one by one, the streetlights were coming on as the municipal lamplighter bicycled on his rounds.

"Ivor," Raffles said, as our frockcoated fence lighted the gas here in his sitting-room and drew down the blinds, "this collector you know who pays high for Dickensiana, no questions asked—I take it you could get a good price from him for the original manuscript of a Dickens book?"

Kern's shrewd eyes gleamed. "I could name my own figure, Raffles. The right kind of manuscript, like the right kind of painting, is a sound long-term investment. With time, it increases in value faster than money in government bonds at a measly three-and-a-half percent."

"Would it affect the deal," Raffles said, "if one page were missing from the manuscript—say, for example, page 117?"

"Bah!" said Kern. "The buyer I have in mind would be so shaky with excitement that he'd never notice the absence of just one page—until after the deal was done. And I'd make the sale 'as is.' "

Meditatively, Raffles lighted a cigarette, and just then a bell jangled tinnily, down in the shop. Excusing himself, Kern ran downstairs. Almost immediately, he ran back up again.

"That was the urchin we've been waiting for," he said, "my snoop's runner. Raffles, the bloke with the stiff knee is at a pub called The Better Thing in Manette Street, Soho."

"Manette Street?" I interjected alertly. "That street's named for a Dickens character, Dr. Manette, in a novel about London and Paris, *A Tale of Two Cities*."

"The two cities of the matter we're involved in, Bunny, are London and Sydney, New South Wales," Raffles said dryly. Crushing out his cigarette in the ashtray, he rose, reaching for his topper. "Ivor, you'd better come with us—to call off your snoop before Manders and I take over." Kern's underworld snoops were often useful to us, as were certain portly butlers, weedy footmen, Frenchified ladies' maids, slinky bootboys, and other domestics who, employed in patrician households, regularly pocketed generous bribes from Kern. He knew his business. But it was not Raffles' practice to allow himself or me to be known by sight to members of Kern's secret legion of informers, so Kern accompanied us in the cab in which we jingled off through the thickening mist to Soho.

Strangely enough, the narrow streets and dark alleys of London's "Little Italy," as Soho was called, were within a stone's throw of Piccadilly, where Raffles had his chambers in the dignified Albany,

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and not much farther from my own small flat in Mount Street.

It was about half-past six when, at the corner of Manette Street, in the polyglot purlieux of Soho, Raffles paid off our cabbie. Leaving Raffles and me to wait, Kern walked off along the street. The *pastaciutta* shops were open, and with the hour of the evening meal imminent, were thronged with Neapolitan housewives, inimitably handsome in their black lace head-shawls. Carrying long loaves of bread and flasks of Chianti, they hurried past with sidelong glances at us from fine dark eyes, the air meanwhile redolent with the savours of the best cookery in London.

On the fruitsellers' barrows along Manette Street, naphtha flares pulsated in the mist. The Cockney cries of the barrow boys, who were doing a lively trade, mingled with the strains of a barrel-organ grinding out arias from *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Overhead, hardly visible in the mist and with little chance of drying in it, washing hung from lines.

Kern reappeared. "I've got rid of my snoop," he told us. "Your man with the knee is still in the pub. He's in the Saloon Bar. If you go into the Public Bar, you can watch him through the hatch."

"Come on, Bunny," said Raffles.

Leaving Kern, and threading our way between the housewives marketing at the barrows, we pushed open the swing-doors and entered the Public Bar of the Manette Street tavern, The Better Thing, which was so named to commemorate Sidney Carton, hero of *A Tale of Two Cities*, whose famous last words, as he mounted the steps to lay his head on the block of the guillotine, had been: "It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

The bar was crowded. As I elbowed my way to the counter, where some good-natured rowdies were trying to teach a monkey in a red fez to drink gin, Raffles peered through a communicating hatch into the Saloon Bar, the more select part of the pub.

"It's aas I thought might be the case, Bunny," Raffles said, as, carefully carrying a couple of whiskies, I rejoined him. "Our man's not alone. He's with someone we've seen before. Take a look."

Stooping, I peered through the hatch. I spotted the Artful Dodger immediately. Sallow, saturnine, respectably frockcoated and grey-sideburned, a tophat pushed back on his head, he was very much at home. Sprawled on a red plush banquette, he had one of his long, sinewy arms around the hour-glass waist of a young woman, fashionably hatted and costumed, who was drinking port-and-lemon. As

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she raised her glass to her lips, I saw that she was wearing red lace gloves. I recognised her by them. My scalp tingled. She was the attractive young woman whom we had seen in the vehement converse with the male attendant at Room 28 in the museum.

Straightening up, I met Raffles' eyes. There was a wicked mirth in them.

Soon the Dodger and his doxy left the pub. Finishing our drinks hastily, we followed. The couple walked along Manette Street. As they passed one after another of the naphtha flares pulsating in the mist, I saw that the tall Dodger still had an arm about the waist of his seductive companion.

They turned the corner into a narrow street. It was poorly lighted and after the hurly-burly of Manette Street the mist seemed thicker here. I could scarcely discern our quarry. In the quiet I became aware of the rumbling deep notes of an organ. We were approaching Soho's historic old church. It was the hour of Evensong. The rumbling of the organ swelled louder. Faint hues of green and gold, of azure and yellow and rich crimson, tinted the saffron mist ahead. They were the hues kindled by the small flames of innumerable tallow candles shining out through the stained-glass gothic windows of the ancient church.

The iron railings of the churchyard loomed up. Later of nights, when the candles had been snuffed, the stained-glass windows had grown dark and the voice of the organ was stilled, it was on the lichen-cushioned tomb-slabs of this churchyard that the streetwalkers of Piccadilly were wont to entertain custom.

Suddenly, there ahead of us, the tall Artful Dodger jerked his doxy through the the open gate of the church yard into the shadows among the tombs. The organ pealed. I heard a stifled scream.

"This'll never do," said Raffles, and running fleetly, he was gone from my side.

Following, my heart pounding, I raced in after him through the churchyard gateway. I saw the Dodger. He no longer held the girl by her waist. He had her, with both his sinewy hands, by the throat. He was bending her backward over a tombstone. My glimpse was momentary, for then Raffles was on him, had him in a headlock, wrenching him off the girl and heaving him round, clear of her.

"That'll be enough, Leonard Handy," Raffles said.

For an instant, in the tinted mist, while the organ pealed, they faced each other, these thieves—Raffles and the Artful Dodger.

Next moment, I was knocked sprawling as the Dodger, running

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like a hare for all his stiff knee, cannoned into me and was gone, racing out through the churchyard gateway.

I staggered to my feet and joined Raffles and the girl. She was very frightened. Her bosom heaved. Raffles helped her to a seat on a tomb-slab.

"You're in good hands now," he assured her. "Take your time. Bunny, give her a cigarette to soothe her."

I lighted a cigarette for her. Taking it in a trembling, red-gloved hand, she puffed hungrily at the cigarette.

"That swine," she said.

"Why did he turn on you?" Raffles asked. "I heard him say he'd choke the truth out of you. Can it be that you've tried to cheat him in some way?"

She was silent, puffing at the cigarette.

"No answer?" said Raffles. "Very well, let me tell you what *I* think has happened here. I think your gangleader wanted a certain manuscript stolen from a certain museum. I think that he had a bookbinder prepare an identical volume but with the pages left blank. Your part in the conspiracy was to enmesh the attendant at Room 28 in the toils of your undeniable charm. This achieved, you were to tempt the attendant, museum attendants being notoriously underpaid, into aiding you in the robbery and sharing the proceeds with you, he perhaps to receive also—who knows?—some additional dividend with which you alone could pleasure him."

"Who are you?" said the girl.

"You were then," Raffles said, ignoring the girl's not unreasonable question, "to convey to the bewitched attendant a skeleton key. With this, he was to unlock the specimen-case at a suitable opportunity and carefully loosen the displayed page of the open volume—namely, page 117. This done, you would return to the museum with the volume of blank pages serving as a fashionable bustle to your costume. In the Ladies' Retiring Room, you would remove the volume. You would conceal it in some hiding-place adjacent to Room 28. Your confederate, the lovelorn attendant, would retrieve the volume. Probably late in the day, when the closure bells were ringing and visitors were leaving the museum, the attendant would quickly unlock the specimen-case. He would transfer the loosened page 117 of the volume in the case to the proper place in the volume of blank pages, which he then would put in the case in lieu of the genuine volume, which he would abstract and conceal in the agreed hiding-place. On the following day, you would return to the museum, pos-

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sess yourself of the volume, retire briefly to the Ladies' Room, then exit through the museum turnstiles with the volume serving as your bustle."

"Who *are* you?" the frightened girl said again, her voice tremulous.

"We are thiefcatchers," Raffles explained, "acting in a private capacity for a client to whom that valuable manuscript was originally presented by the great man, now long deceased, whose hand indited it. Now, I must warn you. *If* you've in fact obtained that volume, but have taken it into your head to fence it yourself and pocket the entire proceeds, while trying to fob off your gangleader with the flimsy claim that you *failed* to obtain the volume, you've done something worse than foolish. You've seen for yourself that he suspects you of lying to him. This whole artful scheme was of his conception. Just a minute or two ago, you had his hands throttling you by the neck. Next time, if he knows you've double-crossed him, there's unlikely to be a timely interruption to save you. My colleague here and I know the man's lamentable record from his boyhood on up. You're in a perilous position. I cannot emphasize that too strongly. Does he know where you live?"

"No," whispered the girl, peering about the churchyard with beautiful big haunted eyes. "When he wants to see me, he sends a telegram, naming time and place, to an accommodation address we use, a shop in Tottenham Court Road that sells those sort of books that men like to read in secret."

"Very well," Raffles said. "We shall consider, in less lugubrious surroundings than these, the problem of how best to ensure your safety. Come now, let's find some decent place where we can get a drink, which I'm sure we all need."

He offered the girl his arm. I also offered her mine. With the girl between us, we left the churchyard as the organ boomed and the treble voicces of the chorister boys soared divinely in the concluding amen of the Evensong service.

In the few minutes it took us to walk to the Café Royal, just off nearby Piccadilly Circus, the girl, reassured by our sympathetic proximity, regained some measure of composure. Gently prompted by Raffles, she told us that the name by which she was known to her men friends was Felicity.

At the café, we escorted her into the famous Domino Room, a favourite haunt of London's literati with their mistresses. The lively babble of voices, the thronged tables, the glitter of the gasoliers, the lavish gilding, the admiring glances with which the assembled art-

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ists eyed her, visibly revived Felicity's spirits.

She preened her lace fichu daintily, her manner as haughty as that of the head waiter, who knew Raffles and myself, ushered us with many bows to a vacant table, where Raffles ordered a magnum of champagne, with a light repast of caviar, toast, and slices of lemon.

"It'll be good for you, after the shock you've had," he explained to her. Sympathetically, he elicited from her, with the aid of champagne and caviar, the admission that she had in fact committed the girlish folly of trying to deceive the Artful Dodger.

"A virtual impossibility," Raffles said, "but of course you didn't realise that, you don't know a fraction of what my colleague and I know about that man. Naturally, it didn't occur to you that, in trying to thwart him of the proceeds of his artful robbery plan, you were putting your very life at hazard. Pull up your fichu a little, Felicity—the bruises of his prehensile fingers on your lovely throat are beginning to show. Does it hurt you to swallow?"

"A bit," she admitted.

"Then have some more champagne," Raffles said. "That'll ease your throat—though if he gets at you again, you won't be able to swallow at all. *Ever!* He'll leave you with your tongue turned blue and protruding. We *know* the man!" Frowning worriedly, Raffles turned to me. "There's nowhere in this country where Felicity can feel safe from the man's vengeance. He'll get her, sooner or later. The best thing we can do for Felicity is get her out of the country, don't you think?"

"Absolutely," I agreed, wondering what Raffles had in mind.

"The last thing our client wants," he said, "is for any question to be raised in the public mind about the authenticity of the Dickens manuscript displayed in Room 28 at the museum. The manuscript there now is bogus—except for one page. The genuine manuscript must be returned to the museum director, Dr. Spencer Turnell, without the scandal of police court proceedings, which could cause derisive comment in the newspapers about the vaunted 'precautions against robbery' taken by London museums. One museum successfully robbed, all the museums in the city would seem to thieves to be fair game. The results could be epidemic! Felicity, where *is* the manuscript volume now?"

She took a sip of champagne, her big blue eyes mischievous. "Where d'you think?" she said, with a wriggle.

Never had I seen Raffles so hard put to keep a straight face, and

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I was myself in a similar difficulty.

"You reckless girl!" Raffles said. "When you went to keep your pub appointment with that man, you actually had the manuscript in your bustle?"

"It was only after I'd gone to the pub," she said, "that I got to thinking. He was late for the appointment. I had to wait for him. It made me angry. I thought, 'Why should *I* take all the risks and *him* get the benefit?' So I told him his plan was a flop, the fool attendant at the museum had bungled it."

Raffles drew in his breath, deeply.

"Felicity," he said, "you've quite a future before you—if you manage to stay alive! Now, drink up your champagne and we'll make arrangements for your safety."

He beckoned to a waiter. "Waiter, the bill, please, and have the pageboy call us a cab, a fourwheeler."

In the cab, on the way back to Kern's place in the King's Road, Raffles explained to Felicity that there was one country to which, we had reason to know, the man was highly unlikely to go.

"In Australia, that great country 'Down Under,'" Raffles said, "where men are men and own thousands of acres and millions of sheep, an attractive girl like you, Felicity, will come into her own."

It was a rosy picture that Raffles painted for her, and in the cluttered sitting-room over Kern's antiques shop Raffles borrowed £100 from Kern, and obtained from him the address of a safe house where Felicity could be accommodated temporarily without fear of the Artful Dodger.

"This hundred pounds," Raffles said, putting the money into Felicity's red-gloved hand, "is for you to buy yourself some nice travelling-clothes for your voyage to Australia. We shall see to it that you have a strong escort when you go shopping. As soon as we've arranged for your passage on a comfortable cabin-class ship, we shall see you off with a further hundred pounds. Personally, it wouldn't surprise me if, when you reach Sydney, New South Wales, you're not already married by the ship's captain to some rich Australian fellow-passenger."

Raffles smiled. "Now, Felicity, before we take you to the safe address, you might like us three men to leave you alone for a minute or two."

Raffles, Kern, and I went downstairs to the shop below, where, among the objets d'art, four grandfather clocks ticked audibly. This prompted me to think of something. I pointed out to Raffles that,

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if we hurried, there still was time to catch a train to King's Lynn to-night and secure for ourselves the £11,000 which the Artful Dodger had salted down in his room over the Thorpe Hall stables.

Raffles gave me a strange look.

"By whatever means the Dodger amassed that nest egg, Bunny," Raffles said, "it's no business of ours. He had a bad start in life. With no advantages except artfulness, he's managed to make his way up in the world. It's to his credit. I wouldn't dream of depriving him of his nest egg. What's more, to do so would be incompatible with our duty to Sir Giles Bamford."

A dulcet voice floated to us down the stairs.

"You can come up now," called Felicity.

We went up. We found her smoothing her skirts in the gaslight. The bound volume of the Dickens manuscript, lacking only page 117, which was on public view in Room 28 at the museum, lay on the table.

Confiding the manuscript to the care of the gratified Ivor Kern, and taking precautions to ensure that the Artful Dodger was not stealing vengefully after us in the mist, Raffles and I took Felicity, by cab, to the safe address. It was a genteel house in adjacent Pimlico, and we saw her comfortably installed there.

Nevertheless, my well-meant suggestion that we acquire the Dodger's £11,000 nest egg having been curtly dismissed, I was at a loss to divine Raffles' intentions when we returned by train to Norfolk next day.

Promptly at one p.m., as on the occasion of our previous visit, the train steamed into King's Lynn station. Nobody was there to meet us. We had to hire the station cab, which was drawn by a nag by no means a match for Sir Giles's lively bay mare. It took us well over an hour to trundle out to Thorpe Hall where, as Raffles paid off the rustic cabbie, we found the ginger-haired young ostler, Brown, currycombing the bay mare in the stable yard.

"Ah, there, Brown, good day to you," said Raffles. "Have you seen anything of Mr. Kibbe?"

"No, sir," said Brown, grinning broadly and pulling his forelock, "but one of the parlourmaids do tell I that Mr. Kibbe coom back late last night. 'E weren't 'ere above five minutes, then 'e went orf agin, a-pedallin' fast on 'is bicycle. 'Tis strange doin's, sir, seemin'ly."

"Indeed so," Raffles agreed. "I think Mr. Manders and I will just take a look in the stables. You go on with your work, Brown."

Giving a bay mare a grateful pat, Raffles walked across to the

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stable doors, which stood wide open to the wintry fenland sunshine. He went in. I followed him. He was looking up at the trap door at the top of the ladder.

"You notice, Bunny," he said, "that the padlock which normally secures the bolt of the trap door is not now locked. It's hanging loose. The inference is obvious, but I'll just make sure."

He went up the ladder, raised the trap door, and climbed into the coachman's room. In less than a minute, Raffles came back down the ladder.

"It's as I thought," he said. "After what happened in the Soho churchyard, the Dodger probably thinks we're Scotland Yard men, so he came back here in haste to pick up his nest egg and make off with it."

We went out to the stable yard, where Brown was whistling and hissing between his teeth as he groomed the mare vigorously.

"Brown," Raffles said, "without making any rash promises, I think you may soon be promoted to the topboots and billycock hat of Coachman status. Take care to serve your master well. Come on, Bunny."

We walked on around the gravelled drive to the front door which, at Raffles' tug on the bellpull, was opened to us by Effie, or it might have been Lottie. Bobbing a shy curtsey to us, she led us across the hall to the door of Sir Giles's study. Knocking timidly on the door, she opened it and announced, with a rosy blush, "Mr. Raffles and Mr. Manders, sir."

"My dear fellers!" exclaimed the small General, rising from his desk. "Back already?"

"With good news for you, Sir Giles," Raffles said. "Without encumbering you with details of no consequence, Manders and I have sound reason to believe that your coachman-butler's present 'compassionate leave' will be of long duration. He won't be returning here. You may take it from us that the man is off your back."

The transformation in the small General was astonishing. Years seemed to fall from him. He groped for his monocle—and made an extraordinary discovery.

"Gone!" he exclaimed. "By Jove, Raffles, I've been in agony all mornin' from the gout in my fingers. Now, all of a sudden, miraculously, not a twinge! My gout's gone!"

"Your gout, sir," Raffles suggested, "was probably a physical symptom caused by your long years of uneasiness about your remarkable manservant. Your gout's as unlikely as he is to plague you again."

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His bald head radiant, the small General peeled off his mittens, hurled them scornfully from him. His spaniel Bess hastened to retrieve them for him, but he did not notice this. Squaring his shoulders, he screwed his monocle into his eye and poured three whiskies.

"By Jove, my dear fellers," he said, handing us our drinks, "how can I ever repay you for the service you've done me?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, sir," Raffles said, "I intend to put Bunny Manders up for membership of our club. If, as the club's Oldest Member, you'd care to second his application, your influence—"

"Manders," said Sir Giles heartily, "consider it done!"

"In that case, General," Raffles said, "Manders and I consider ourselves amply repaid—do we not, Bunny?"

"Absolutely, Raffles," I said, elated—for we also had acquired a valuable long-term investment, the Dickens manuscript.

Raffles smiled.

"In the circumstances, Sir Giles, it would be pointless to let the past rankle. There is, to quote Dickens, a 'far, far better thing' for us to do. Your coachman-butler had a very bad start in life but, in his way, he's risen above it. So I propose that, for all his faults, we include 'Jack Dawkins, the Artful Dodger,' in our minds as we drink the great Mr. Charles Dickens's favourite toast," said A. J. Raffles, raising his glass, *"to Absent Friends!"*

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a *NEW* parody-pastiche by

JON L. BREEN

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Critics and commentators have frequently noted subtle but significant differences between the A. J. Raffles of E. W. Hornung's original stories and the A. J. Raffles of Barry Perowne's pastiches. This story advances the hypothesis that the two gentleman burglars were not different views of the same man, as has been supposed, but were rather brothers and competitors.*

RUFFLES VERSUS RUFFLES; or, The Solid Gold Cricket Bat

by JON L. BREEN

"Do buck up, Beany," said A. J. Ruffles, a note of weary exasperation ill-concealed in his voice. "It's not as if it were your very first burglary."

Burglary. The word cut through me like a knife. It must be admitted that I was a burglar, but I could more easily admit it to my reader than I then could admit it to myself.

"What kind of man must I be, Ruffles?" I wailed. "Stealing things. Stealing things from other people's houses. It is no wonder that I feel myself a thief. Surely I am the lowest, the very lowest of creatures, the scum of the earth."

"Well, my good fellow," he returned heartily, "you at least are not without company, for I, as the one who has led you into this regretted life of crime, must surely be as low and as scummy as you."

The notion horrified me. "Not you, Ruffles! The premier fast bowler of his generation and a batsman of no less repute! The sporting world reveres you, Ruffles, as one of the great cricketers and indeed one of the great gentlemen of our generation. My dear friend, these

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deprecations I call onto my own head could never apply to you."

Ruffles laughed. "Good old Beany. Woefully inconsistent but endearing nonetheless. Are you ready to get on with the plan then, or do you have more missiles to hurl at your own head and keep away from mine?"

"Your sarcasm can be nettling, old man," I said. "But you do have a way to bring me out of my attacks of conscience. What was this valuable object we were to steal?"

"Sir Austwick Maltravers' solid gold cricket bat."

"Is it sporting, old boy, to steal another player's bat?"

Ruffles laughed. "You do have your charm, Beany. It is not the bat he plays with, but an ornament. No, I would never steal another player's bat, but this particular one has scant hope for any centuries. Would you like to hear my plan now?"

"It is the plans and the challenges that keep me in the game, Ruffles."

"Along with your chronic impecuniousness."

"Yes, that, too. But I daresay your plan will be of such cleverness that no other cracksman alive could come up with it. Possibly excepting your brother, R. J. Ruffles."

"A soft-centered lout," Ruffles snorted. "No fear, Beany, our R. J. would never stoop to stealing for gain. He fancies himself a Robin Hood and needs some noble motivation for his every theft. Does your cousin Benny still work with him? Poor fellow."

I sighed. For often I envied my cousin Benny, meeting the famous and salving his conscience with high motives.

"I don't really fancy a gold cricket bat to play with, Benny," said R. J. Ruffles. "Far too soft for one thing. And a trifle ostentatious, don't you think?"

I had to agree. Our hansom was jingling and clipclopping, clipclopping and jingling towards the London house of Sir Austwick Maltravers. The famous cricketer, W. G. Grace, had told us at the tea break of a friendly village match, shortly after Ruffles had got his wicket for an inning of only eight runs, that the eccentric Sir Austwick would display his golden bat at a house party for a small and select group of guests. Ruffles had somehow got us a last-minute invitation.

"But we're going to steal it?" I ventured.

"Yes, Benny, I fear it would be the only sporting thing to do."

"Your brother A. J. might also be attracted by such a prize."

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"No, Benny, A. J. Ruffles would never go after anything that *ought* to be stolen. If he knew a girl's happiness depended on that golden bat disappearing, he'd promptly turn his back and look for other loot. Our A. J. can't abide complications, you see."

"Are we going to steal it for gain, R. J.?"

"Gain?"

"I mean are we going to sell it and thus realise a certain monetary profit from it?"

Ruffles sniffed. "Benny, a gentleman-burglar must have a certain code of behaviour."

I sighed, leaned back in the seat, thoughts jingling like the hansom in my head. Though the Ruffles brothers had the utmost contempt for each other and seldom spoke to each other, I had often compared notes with my cousin Beany. He was, I must confess, a neurotic personality, plagued by guilt. Though the profit figures he quoted from his forays with A. J. Ruffles sent my senses reeling and filled me with envy, he in his turn seemed most inexplicably to envy me. While I was trying to draw from him details, specifically financial ones, of the various burglaries he had done in concert with A. J. Ruffles, he was asking me for some remembrances of celebrities I had come across in the course of my travels with R. J. Ruffles.

I coined some rather boring anecdotes about George Bernard Shaw, John Singer Sargent, Sir Henry Irving, Buffalo Bill, and other personalities of the day, and he seemed transfixed. I had found that the famous were merely people, tiresomely similar to people who were not famous. Gold, on the other hand, struck me as possessing an infinite variety of unique possibilities.

The horses' hooves continued their maddening clipclopping. I felt I must review with Ruffles the details of our burglary plan. Knowing him well, I could perceive his irritation at my dwelling on the ugly idea of gain. To dissipate the cold silence and restore what remained of our comradery, I asked him the question I knew I must.

"Why," I inquired, "does a girl's happiness depend on the theft of the blasted cricket bat?"

"The young woman in question is Penelope Maltravers, Sir Austwick's daughter. As you may have read in the society pages, she is soon to be married to a young chap named Clive Ambrose-Smythe. He comes of a family of tradesmen but highly respectable ones, dealing in gold and jewelry, and if anything they are even more wealthy than the Maltravers lot. You remember, I am sure, Benny, the circumstances in which the solid gold cricket bat was awarded

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to Sir Austwick. He captained one side in a special charity cricket match played in honour of Her Majesty's golden jubilee in '87. The winning side received small gold-plated replicas of the gold bat, and the genuine article went to the captain. The money for the trophy had been put up by a philanthropic bakery firm.

"Now, it so happens that young Ambrose-Smythe's father was the goldsmith responsible for the manufacture of the bat. In fact, that was how the two families became acquainted. I am sure it should not be difficult for you, Benny, to deduce the rest of the story and the reason why our absconding with the bat can ensure the young couple's happiness."

"I cannot, Ruffles. I fear you have left a part out. Or perhaps I am too dense."

"Perhaps if I told you that a representative of Lloyd's was shortly to make an evaluation of the bat for insurance purposes, Benny. Do the implications now become clear?"

"They do not," I replied, somewhat irritably.

"It doesn't matter. You'll know soon enough. The important thing is that you have our plan for laying hands on the bat well in mind."

For the rest of the journey I could get no more out of him. He took pleasure in being deucedly mysterious. Shortly we were meeting our fellow guests.

Clive Ambrose-Smythe was a grave and slender young man, scrupulously polite. His fiancée was a pale young flower with unfortunately prominent front teeth. I understood the urgency of saving her happiness, for she might never have a chance at any again. Sir Austwick, a bluff and hearty sportsman, seemed awed to have the famous cricketer, R. J. Ruffles, as his guest.

I was thinking how convenient it was to be guests in the house, for the purpose of stealing the bat. I thought rather amusedly of the guilt such a propinquity would put my cousin Beany through.

The other guests were a tiresomely distinguished lot: Mme. Sarah Bernhardt, Flinders Petrie, Thomas Hardy, young Bertrand Russell, Rudyard Kipling, Gilbert and Sullivan (they scarcely spoke to each other all evening), Toulouse-Lautrec, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

After dinner Sir Austwick displayed his prize for the guests. He seemed a bit nervous about having the solid gold bat in the house—normally it was kept in a bank vault, where it would return immediately after the weekend was over.

The other guests made gushing comments about the beauty of the bat. I personally believed it an aesthetic disaster, but the monetary

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value of that much gold sent my senses reeling.

One's senses can only stand so much reeling, however, and soon I dropped back from the group and fell into desultory conversation with the prospective bridegroom, Clive Ambrose-Smythe.

He was indeed a morose young man, as if the whole weight of the world were on his shoulders. He revealed to me that his late father, the goldsmith of the bat, had died a suicide a couple of years before. Apparently, the family business had gone through some difficult times. All was on an even keel now, but it had left its mark on the young man.

At around eleven o'clock, after a rather unexciting game of whist, the party retired to our respective rooms. For a period of three hours I lay awake in bed, awaiting the hour designated for meeting Ruffles on the staircase. Candles in hand, we crept downstairs to the library, where the cricket bat was being kept. It had begun to rain, and periodic peals of thunder and flashes of lightning punctuated our descent. It made me edgy, but I realised that the extra noise was an added cover for our nocturnal activities.

Trusting of his guests, Sir Austwick had taken no precautions to keep them from his prized bat. All of the security arrangements, which included an armed watchman and several vicious dogs, were concentrated on the grounds outside the house.

Silently we crept into the library, towards the bat. I reviewed in my mind the incredibly complicated plans Ruffles had devised for getting the bat off the grounds and ourselves back to our beds, unsuspected. I need not go into those plans here, for as it turned out, they were unnecessary.

We were not alone in the library.

Two figures stood crouched over the cricket bat. They looked up, startled, at our appearance. We were no less surprised to find that we were not the only burglars with our sights on the gaudy trophy.

However, once accustomed to the idea that an outside job was also being attempted, we could scarcely be surprised at the identities of our rival cracksmen. They were A. J. Ruffles and my cousin Beany!

"Imagine finding you here, brother," said R. J.

"I did not realise this was a part of Sherwood Forest, brother," said A. J., rather sarcastically.

"It must have been difficult getting in here, A. J. And you poor chaps seem to be dripping wet. You'll catch your death."

"An occupational hazard, R. J. And this is hardly the time to think about a change of clothes."

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"What of the watchman and the guard dogs?"

"Enjoying a most needed sleep. They'll be fine in the morning. Beany got a nasty scratch from one of the pieces of broken glass your hosts kindly scattered along the top of the wall, but otherwise we seem to be in fine fettle. Well, brother, this is an unusual situation. We've never before selected the same booty in my memory. Or at least we haven't gone after it the same night. I suppose some sort of bargain is indicated, eh? We're amenable to a fair split of the loot, aren't we, Beany?"

My cousin agreed. "Certainly, A. J." I must confess I was less enthusiastic about the prospect of dividing the spoils.

Then R. J. Ruffles said something that surprised us all and rather upset me. "Take it, A. J. It is of no moment to me. Take it."

"What?" his brother said suspiciously. "You don't want it?"

"The important thing is that it be stolen. That it leave this house now and never be seen again. It is of no concern to me who gets it. It is, after all, all in the family. And I know, as a cricketer and a gentleman, you would not stoop to any kind of retaliation should you find that the booty holds for you an unpleasant surprise."

"Unpleasant surprise?"

"Could it be an infernal machine, Ruffles?" exclaimed my cousin Beany.

"I hardly think so," said A. J. disparagingly. "Explain yourself, brother."

"Oh, very well. The cricket bat is a fake. It isn't solid gold at all. It's gold-plated, just like the smaller replicas the other team members received. Not precisely valueless, of course, but scarcely the prize it appears to be."

Beany, A. J., and I exclaimed as one.

"Then why the devil did you want to steal it?" A. J. inquired heatedly.

"Very simple. If Sir Austwick Maltravers were to discover that fact now, he would know that the goldsmith, Ambrose-Smythe, in a time when business reversals were threatening him with bankruptcy, took the money for a solid gold bat but delivered one of some baser composition. Knowing the truth, the volatile Sir Austwick would be quite likely to cause a public scandal, blackening the name of Ambrose-Smythe and forcing the heir to break off his engagement with Penelope Maltravers. How can we, A. J., allow these young lovers to be punished for the follies of their elders? It makes little real difference to Sir Austwick whether or not he owns a solid gold

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cricket bat. As I think you'll agree, he could never play a match with it. And as for poor Ambrose-Smythe *père,* although his treachery allowed him to recoup the family fortune before his self-inflicted death, the knowledge of his iniquity haunted him to an early grave."

"And haunts his son, Clive," I put in. "I'm sure now that the son knows of his father's crime and that this explains his air of misery."

"Don't be too sure, Benny," said A. J. Ruffles. "Have you had a look at the bride?"

R. J. shook his head sadly. "A. J., that remark is unworthy of you. What has become of the second greatest fast bowler of his generation?"

"Greatest!" corrected Beany loyally.

This had been an unusually long conversation to be taking place among burglars in a dark house in the dead of night, with only the rain and occasional thunder to drown it out. Now we heard the distinct sound of footsteps approaching the door of the library.

R. J. Ruffles gripped his brother's arm. "A. J., I implore you, for the ideals of fair play and sportsmanship, for young love and spring flowers, for cricket, for honour, for England, cosh Benny and me over our poor unworthy heads and leave by that window with the cricket bat. If you fail, romance will die an untimely death this night."

A. J. grumbled several expletives, the mildest of which was "bloody Robin Hood," but he did his duty.

For an indefinite time R. J. Ruffles and I lay unconscious on the library floor. Upon our awakening, heads throbbing heroically and my hand bleeding slightly but otherwise undamaged, we told the gathering of our futile efforts to prevent the robbery of the bat.

The next day, returning to our rooms at the Albany, we found a surprise waiting for us. Someone had broken in and left behind Sir Austwick Maltravers' stolen cricket bat.

A note attached to the bat read: *"THIS TROPHY IS MORE IN YOUR LINE THAN MINE, DEAR BROTHER."*

"He's not such a bad chap, you know," said R. J. Ruffles.

"Of course, I know," I said.

Curious about the actual composition of the bat, Ruffles made an effort to scrape away the gold plating. To his surprise he activated a hinge on the surface of the bat and it fell open. An object wrapped in black velvet dropped to the floor. It proved to be a smaller version of the full-sized trophy.

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He looked at it closely, hefted it in his hand.

"Why would this be in here, Benny?" he mused.

"I don't know, Ruffles."

"I think I do. I think if we have this assayed, we will find that this smaller cricket bat really is of solid gold. Do you know what that means?"

"I fear that I do not."

"Good old Benny. Reliable as ever. It means that the late Ambrose-Smythe *was* a man of honour, that he delivered a solid gold cricket bat after all, merely not in the scale originally contemplated. We must be sure that the son knows of this, Benny. It will make his and his bride's days ahead that much happier, don't you agree?"

"I do, Ruffles, I do."

"And I think that this little gold bat would make a most suitable wedding present, don't you?"

"Ruffles, that would be a beautiful gesture."

Ruffles looked at me searchingly. "Then it doesn't bother you that we will not benefit monetarily from this little adventure?"

"Not in the least, Ruffles."

"That's very handsome of you, Benny."

"Er, Ruffles, I think there is something I must tell you. I'm rather surprised you have not noticed, though my cousin and I do resemble each other somewhat. I am not Benny."

"Not Benny?"

"I am Beany. Last night, when A. J. Ruffles was coshing you, Benny was coshing me so that he could leave with A. J. I had known for some time that he was interested in making a switch, and I must confess so was I. With your permission I will take Benny's place as your assistant and Boswell."

Ruffles was momentarily nonplussed. Finally he said, "Agreed, old man. I suppose you will do just as well."

"Thank you, Ruffles!" I cried. "Now you must tell me. What is the Prince of Wales really like?"

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

JOHN H. DIRCKX

The fine-drawn story of a vendetta—the Beaumonts versus the Whitakers—in Appalachia, and "the devious and subtle ways in which the rival families carried on their feud" . . .

LOCAL JUSTICE

by JOHN H. DIRCKX

When I was at the Police Academy nobody told me that right and wrong, truth and justice are abstractions that dwell, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder. I had to find that out for myself when I handled my first murder investigation as the Chief of Police of Pitchwell.

Even a stranger to Appalachia can tell that Pitchwell is a community of some importance by the number of shot-peppered fenceposts (without fences) and signposts (without signs) on its outskirts, by the imposing profusion of rusted iron bedsteads and abandoned cars strewn across its stony and untilled fields, and by the dense population of semidomestic fowl roosting on those posts, bedsteads, and cars and sorting through the garbage along the edges of the dirt roads.

When the citizenry of Pitchwell decided that they needed a full-time Chief of Police, they solicited applications from the graduating class of the State Police Academy. I'm not sure why they picked me. I'm not sure anyone else applied. One of those who didn't was a Pitchwell native, and after I'd signed a two-year contract with the township he considered it his duty to explain to me why no one but a lunatic would take the job.

The essential fact of life in and around Pitchwell is the long-standing war between the Beaumonts and the Whitakers. History

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has known more colorful rivalries—Montague vs. Capulet, Hatfield vs. McCoy, Lancaster vs. York—but none of them can match the blood-feud between Beaumonts and Whitakers for sheer duration. Some say the trouble started on English soil during the Norman period; others trace it back even further.

Feuding clans, like feuding royal houses, have sometimes settled their differences by marriage. Numberless matches between Beaumonts and Whitakers down through the years have only widened the rift between the two families, generating more rancor and ill-will, setting father against daughter, brother against sister, and turning in-laws into outlaws.

The feud is not only a way of life for several hundred people but a major economic and political force in the community. The State Chamber of Commerce will tell you that the chief exports of the district are soft coal, soybeans, and hogs. To the locals, mining is synonymous with Beaumont and farming with Whitaker. As if that weren't enough to keep the clans divided, they both go in for moonshining in a serious way.

The event that triggered the search for a Chief of Police was the election of Lyle Whitaker as county sheriff. The mayor and trustees of Pitchwell, all of them Beaumonts by blood, marriage, or political alliance, foresaw a bitter struggle to keep the coal trucks and carloads of hooch rolling once the new sheriff had deputized about 20 of his brothers and cousins and nephews. My informant suggested that I was being hired as a mere figurehead, a front for the organized lawlessness of Pitchwell.

I wasn't prepared to believe that anybody could turn me into a puppet or a man of straw, and besides, a contract is a contract. When I arrived in town, Mayor Olney extended a quiet but cordial welcome and installed me in the new police headquarters, two rooms of an abandoned feed store on the main street. The rest of the building was being used as a church. Next door an abandoned church was being used as a saloon.

When, the day was after I was sworn in, Sheriff Whitaker drove down from the county seat to pay me an official visit, my education began in earnest. Unlike his counterparts in the movies, this sheriff was elderly, educated, and urbane. With his long ascetic face and outmoded business suit he looked every inch the retired high-school principal that he was.

He said he'd come down just to find out if I was still alive and to settle, in a friendly fashion, one or two questions of jurisdiction. Our

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talk was short but it made a strong impression on me. He advised me to give myself plenty of time to absorb the peculiar ambience (his word) of the territory before I did anything drastic in the way of law enforcement—otherwise I might get the stuffing (my word) blown out of me.

It didn't take me long to learn to tell a Beaumont from a Whitaker. Allowing for the effects of intermarriage, the typical Whitaker is long and bony, with clean-shaven lantern jaws. The Beaumonts, darker and inclined to plumpness, cultivate chin beards as a sort of tribal badge, and are never seen in bib overalls. A local man who isn't related to one of the families shows his preference by wearing either overalls or a beard, and there's about as much chance of finding both on the same man as of finding pears and pine cones on the same tree.

I hired a couple of officers to cover nights and my every-other-Sunday off. Philpott was an ex-deputy sheriff who had lost his job in the late change of administration, and Humble had just finished a six-year hitch in the Navy as an MP. I was still too green to realize that if they hadn't both been solid Beaumont partisans I would never have seen their applications.

Except for the almost nightly brawl at the saloon just before closing time, and an occasional theft of "gasoline" (translation: moonshine) from a tool shed or the trunk of a parked car, I found Pitchwell a surprisingly peaceful and law-abiding town. As the days passed, my wonder grew at the devious and subtle ways in which the rival families carried on their feud. Through generations of experience they had moved from open hostilities to a kind of armed truce. There was always plenty of tension in the air, but a member of one clan never let himself be drawn into a public fight with a member of the other. It just wasn't done.

Though the citizens of Pitchwell seemed to have accepted me readily enough, they never had much to say to me. Silence may be golden but it doesn't go far when you're trying to fill out an investigational report. For a long time I wondered whether it was the badge or the fact that I was an outsider. Gradually I came to understand that people in that corner of the world just cultivate taciturnity as an art form.

My most memorable lesson in what Sheriff Whitaker had called the ambience of Pitchwell came with rude violence about two months after I took office. On one subject the Sheriff and my employers in the township were in perfect accord: both had told me to leave the

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moonshiners to the Federal authorities unless I was suicidally inclined. Since the local statutes preserved a tactful silence on the subject of illegal liquor, so did I. Still, I would have had to be blind and deaf not to realize that the whole economy and social structure of downtown Pitchwell were built on a foundation of white lightning.

I had taken semipermanent lodgings with Alvas Chidsey, who alternately plied the professions of barber and diesel mechanic when not occupied with his duties as vice-mayor. Chidsey was recently widowed, and since he hadn't succeeded in keeping his two or three grownup sons in Pitchwell there was room to spare at his place. His ancient but watertight stone-and-timber house sat square in the middle of 16 acres on which he raised briars, thistles, boulders, and an occasional rattlesnake. Also on the premises was a windowless shed with a chimney and a padlock, to which Chidsey retired at odd moments for purposes undisclosed.

Early one evening I was sitting at the kitchen table reading the paper when I heard a gunshot outside, not far from the house. I turned off the lights and peered out into the twilight. There was a man down at the shed, and even in the waning light I could see his bib overalls. He had evidently just blown the lock off the door with a shotgun.

I was alone in the house. I tried to call Chidsey to let him know what was happening but I couldn't track him down. The next time I looked out the window the door of the shed was open and the man had disappeared. I radioed Philpott, who was on night duty, and told him to get right over. Then I took a flashlight and a rifle and slipped out the front door, out of sight of the shed.

Chidsey's place sat on the side of a hill that was gouged by numerous shallow gullies. I got into one of these and stumbled along through the thickening gloom until I was within 50 yards of the shed. Sounds of something heavy being moved and snatches of speech reached me from the unlighted interior. Deciding to make my move before it got any darker, I knelt behind a tangle of brush and covered the shed with my rifle.

"Police. Come out with your hands up."

"Hey, what's going on, man?" said Chidsey's voice from inside the shed. A moment later he peered around the door frame, trying to find me in the dark.

"Stay inside, Mr. Chidsey. There was a prowler down here a few minutes ago. I think he shot the lock off the shed." Without leaving my cover I peered around through the shadowy underbrush. The

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night was cool but my shirt was plastered to my back with sweat.

Chidsey, who had located me by my voice, came out of the shed shaking his head and caressing the tuft of whiskers on his chin. "Heck, that was me. I lost the key."

Warily I climbed through the brush and joined him. "Sure didn't look like you from up at the house. I didn't even know you were around."

"Just got home a few minutes ago." He kept moving farther from the shed.

"I could've sworn I heard you talking to somebody in there."

"Talking to myself. Keeps your courage up when your flashlight's burned out."

I was going to offer him mine when the lights of Officer Philpott's purple Renault came bobbing along the somewhat ill-defined driveway. Chidsey went off at a trot to meet him and they were deep in conversation when I reached the car.

"Chief, there was a call for you just before I left. Boyd Crawford, about some people camped out on his land. Said he wouldn't talk to nobody but you."

"Did you get his number?"

"He don't have a phone. He was calling from the market. Said he'd be home time you got there."

Boyd Crawford, an eccentric with a beard of patriarchal proportions, owned a lot of worked-out strip mines and was generally reputed the oldest man in town. He whiled away his declining years by picking quarrels with farmers about property boundaries and then settling out of court. At least once a week he demanded to see me immediately to lodge a complaint against some representative of the Whitaker clan who had moved a fence, diverted a ditch, or run a mowing machine through one of the weed patches.

Crawford sat on the township council by right of primogeniture, and it didn't take much coaxing from Chidsey to persuade me to go and see him that night instead of putting off the interview until next day. But after driving into town and hammering for 15 minutes on the door of the picturesque ruin where Crawford lived, I gave up on him. Walking back to my Jeep, I saw Dr. Beaumont, the local GP, getting into his car.

"On your way out to Wolford's, aren't you?" he asked. Beaumont was a surly, unkempt person whose creased round face always reminded me of a baby about to cry.

"What's going on at Wolford's?" I asked.

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"Some guy in the woods up there went on a shooting spree. You want to ride with me?"

"No, thanks, I've got the Jeep. Anybody get hurt?"

"They didn't call me out there to fix the windows."

Even if the doctor hadn't been leading the way, I could have found Wolford's farm easily enough, since it bordered on Chidsey's land. Like Chidsey, Wolford was a farmer in name only, a dyed-in-the-wool adherent of the Beaumont interests who made his living selling furniture, appliances, and a pungent-smelling all-purpose cleanser that came in gallon jugs.

During the short ride out of town I tried unsuccessfully to get Philpott on the radio. It was pitch-dark by the time we reached Wolford's, but the barnyard was lit up like a boxing ring. Half a dozen men were standing around Philpott's car, some with shotguns. Dr. Beaumont parked at the edge of the graveled yard and stayed in his car, smoking.

"Where's Officer Philpott?" I asked as I joined the group. They pointed up the dark and thickly timbered hillside in whose lee the farmstead rested.

"Up there with Ollie Wolford in the four-wheeler. Best wait."

"Wait for what? Did somebody get hurt?"

"Bringing him down now," was all the answer I received. In the distance I could hear the whine of the approaching vehicle.

I looked from one to another of the silent, sullen men. Some were Beaumonts, some Whitakers. At least, I said to myself, if a capital crime has been committed here we'll eventually get some kind of statement, true or false, from somebody.

Wolford's four-wheel pickup bounded out of the darkness and pulled up in the barnyard, splashed with mud and adorned here and there with foliage stripped from trees. Dr. Beaumont got to the truck before I did. I noticed he left his bag in his car. If Philpott was surprised to see me there he didn't show it.

Ollie Wolford let down the tailgate, exposing to the glare of the floodlights what lay in the bed of the truck. Beaumont rolled the body over on its back, probed the gunshot wound in its throat with his little finger, and headed back to his car and then to town. Meanwhile, the customary silence reigned.

"What's the story here, Philpott?" I asked.

Philpott hitched up his gunbelt and rubbed his hands. "Some clown went on a homicidal rampage up there in the woods. Must have been drunk out of his mind. Like to blew Ollie and two of his

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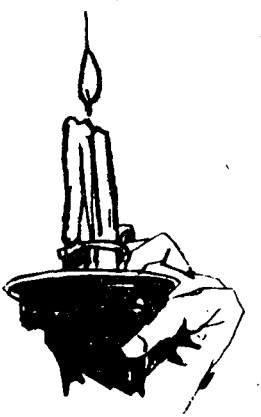
boys to smithereens."

I bent over the still form on the truck bed. The ankles were tied together with baling wire, the shredded overalls soaked with mud and blood, and the face was battered beyond recognition. Gingerly I felt the pockets, which were empty. "So who's this?" I asked. By now the other men had gathered around the back of the truck, where they stood, mute and grim, staring at the body.

I put a little more authority into my tone. "Can anybody identify the victim?"

Philpott smiled indulgently and pointed to an old 12-gauge shotgun lying beside the body. "You got it wrong ways around, Chief," he said, looking me square in the eye. "This here ain't a victim. The victims all got away. This here's your murderer."



DETECTIVERSE

BROUGHT TO LIGHT

by MARK GRENIER

Said a pyro who's known as Maguire,
When they asked why he'd started the fire,
"Though you've given me pause,
I have lit on the cause:
I was led by a burning desire."

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

Among the 6000 manuscripts your Editor has purchased for publication in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, in all the 39 years of EQMM's existence, we remember only one story similar in theme (though entirely different in plot) to the story you are about to read. . . To Dix, after sixteen years in prison, it was a good melody to come home to; to EQMM readers, this is a good story to come home to. . .

HORN MAN

by CLARK HOWARD

When Dix stepped off the Greyhound bus in New Orleans, old Rainey was waiting for him near the terminal entrance. He looked just the same as Dix remembered him. Old Rainey had always looked old, since Dix had known him, ever since Dix had been a little boy. He had skin like black saddle leather and patches of cotton-white hair, and his shoulders were round and stooped. When he was contemplating something, he chewed on the inside of his cheeks, pushing his pursed lips in and out as if he were revving up for speech. He was doing that when Dix walked up to him.

"Hey, Rainey."

Rainey blinked surprise and then his face split into a wide smile of perfect, gleaming teeth. "Well, now. Well, well, well, now." He looked Dix up and down. "They give you that there suit of clothes?"

Dix nodded. "Everyone gets a suit of clothes if they done more than a year." Dix's eyes, the lightest blue possible without being gray, hardened just enough for Rainey to notice. "And I sure done more than a year," he added.

"That's the truth," Rainey said. He kept the smile on his face and

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changed the subject as quickly as possible. "I got you a room in the Quarter. Figured that's where you'd want to stay."

Dix shrugged. "It don't matter no more."

"It will," Rainey said with the confidence of years. "It will when you hear the music again."

Dix did not argue the point. He was confident that none of it mattered. Not the music, not the French Quarter, none of it. Only one thing mattered to Dix.

"Where is she, Rainey?" he asked. "Where's Madge?"

"I don't rightly know," Rainey said.

Dix studied him for a moment. He was sure Rainey was lying. But it didn't matter. There were others who would tell him.

They walked out of the terminal, the stooped old black man and the tall, prison-hard white man with a set to his mouth and a canvas zip-bag containing all his worldly possessions. It was late afternoon: the sun was almost gone and the evening coolness was coming in. They walked toward the Quarter, Dix keeping his long-legged pace slow to accommodate old Rainey.

Rainey glanced at Dix several times as they walked, chewing inside his mouth and working up to something. Finally he said, "You been playing at all while you was in?"

Dix shook his head. "Not for a long time. I did a little the first year. Used to dry play, just with my mouthpiece. After a while, though, I gave it up. They got a different kind of music over there in Texas. Stompin' music. Not my style." Dix forced a grin at old Rainey. "I ever kill a man again, I'll be sure I'm on *this* side of the Louisiana line."

Rainey scowled. "You know you ain't never killed nobody, boy," he said harshly. "You know it wudn't you that done it. It was *her*."

Dix stopped walking and locked eyes with old Rainey. "How long have you knowed me?" he asked.

"Since you was eight months old," Rainey said. "You know that. Me and my sistuh, we worked for your grandmamma, Miz Jessie DuChatelier. She had the finest gentlemen's house in the Quarter. Me and my sistuh, we cleaned and cooked for Miz Jessie. And took care of you after your own poor mamma took sick with the consumption and died—"

"Anyway, you've knowed me since I was less than one, and now I'm *forty*-one."

Rainey's eyes widened. "Naw," he said, grinning again, "you ain't that old. Naw."

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"Forty-one, Rainey. I been gone sixteen years. I got twenty-five, remember? And I done sixteen."

Sudden worry erased Rainey's grin. "Well, if you forty-one, how old that make *me?*"

"About two hundred. I don't know. You must be seventy or eighty. Anyway, listen to me now. In all the time you've knowed me, have I ever let anybody make a fool out of me?"

Rainey shook his head. "Never. No way."

"That's right. And I'm not about to start now. But if word got around that I done sixteen years for a killing that was somebody else's, I'd look like the biggest fool that ever walked the levee, wouldn't I?"

"I reckon so," Rainey allowed.

"Then don't ever say again that I didn't do. Only one person alive knows for certain positive that I didn't do it. And I'll attend to her myself. Understand?"

Rainey chewed the inside of his cheeks for a moment, then asked, "What you fixin' to do about her?"

Dix's light-blue eyes hardened again. "Whatever I have to do, Rainey," he replied.

Rainey shook his head in slow motion. "Lord, Lord, Lord," he whispered.

Old Rainey went to see Gaston that evening at Tradition Hall, the jazz emporium and restaurant that Gaston owned in the Quarter. Gaston was slick and dapper. For him, time had stopped in 1938. He still wore spats.

"How does he look?" Gaston asked old Rainey.

"He *look* good," Rainey said. "He *talk* bad." Rainey leaned close to the white club-owner. "He fixin' to kill that woman. Sure as God made sundown."

Gaston stuck a Sterling-silver toothpick in his mouth. "He know where she is?"

"I don't think so," said Rainey. "Not yet."

"*You* know where she is?"

"Lastest I heard, she was living over on Burgundy Street with some doper."

Gaston nodded his immaculately shaved and lotioned chin. "Correct. The doper's name is LeBeau. He's young. I think he keeps her around to take care of him when he's sick." Gaston examined his beautifully manicured nails. "Does Dix have a lip?"

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Rainey shook his head. "He said he ain't played in a while. But a natural like him, he can get his lip back in no time a'tall."

"Maybe," said Gaston.

"He can," Rainey insisted.

"Has he got a horn?"

"Naw. I watched him unpack his bag and I didn't see no horn. So I axed him about it. He said after a few years of not playing, he just give it away. To some cowboy he was in the Texas pen with."

Gaston sighed. "He should have killed that fellow on this side of the state line. If he'd done the killing in Louisiana, he would have went to the pen at Angola. They play good jazz at Angola. Eddie Lumm is up there. You remember Eddie Lumm? Clarinetist. Learned to play from Frank Teschemacher and Jimmie Noone. Eddie killed his old lady. So now he blows at Angola. They play good jazz at Angola."

Rainey didn't say anything. He wasn't sure if Gaston thought Dix had really done the killing or not. Sometimes Gaston *played* like he didn't know a thing, just to see if somebody *else* knew it. Gaston was smart. Smart enough to help keep Dix out of trouble if he was a mind. Which was what old Rainey was hoping for.

Gaston drummed his fingertips silently on the table where they sat. "So. You think Dix can get his lip back with no problem, is that right?"

"Tha's right. He can."

"He planning to come around and see me?"

"I don't know. He probably set on finding that woman first. Then he might not be *able* to come see you."

"Well, see if you can get him to come see me first. Tell him I've got something for him. Something I've been saving for him. Will you do that?"

"You bet." Rainey got up from the table. "I'll go do it right now."

George Tennell was big and beefy and mean. Rumor had it that he had once killed two men by smashing their heads together with such force that he literally knocked their brains out. He had been a policeman for 30 years, first in the colored section, which was the only place he could work in the old days, and now in the *Vieux Carre,* the Quarter, where he was detailed to keep the peace to whatever extent it was possible. He had no family, claimed no friends. The Quarter was his home as well as his job. The only thing in the world he admitted to loving was jazz.

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That was why, every night at seven, he sat at a small corner table in Tradition Hall and ate dinner while he listened to the band tune their instruments and warm up. Most nights, Gaston joined him later for a liqueur. Tonight he joined him before dinner.

"Dix got back today," he told the policeman. "Remember Dix?"

Tennell nodded. "Horn man. Killed a fellow in a motel room just across the Texas line. Over a woman named Madge Noble."

"That's the one. Only there's some around don't think he did it. There's some around think *she* did it."

"Too bad he couldn't have found twelve of those people for his jury."

"He didn't have no jury, George. Quit laying back on me. You remember it as well as I do. One thing you'd *never* forget is a good horn man."

Tennell's jaw shifted to the right a quarter of an inch, making his mouth go crooked. The band members were coming out of the back now and moving around on the bandstand, unsnapping instrument cases, inserting mouthpieces, straightening chairs. They were a mixed lot—black, white, and combinations; clean-shaven and goateed; balding and not; clear-eyed and strung out. None of them was under 50—the oldest was the trumpet player, Luther Dodd, who was 86. Like Louis Armstrong, he had learned to blow at the elbow of Joe "King" Oliver, the great cornetist. His Creole-style trumpet playing was unmatched in New Orleans. Watching him near the age when he would surely die was agony for the jazz purists who frequented Tradition Hall.

Gaston studied George Tennell as the policeman watched Luther Dodd blow out the spit plug of his gleaming Balfour trumpet and loosen up his stick-brittle fingers on the valves. Gaston saw in Tennell's eyes that odd look of a man who truly worshipped traditional jazz music, who felt it down in the pit of himself just like the old men who played it, but who had never learned to play himself. It was a look that had the mix of love and sadness and years gone by. It was the only look that ever turned Tennell's eyes soft.

"You know how long I been looking for a horn man to take Luther's place?" Gaston asked. "A straight year. I've listened to a couple dozen guys from all over. Not a one of them could play traditional. Not a one." He bobbed his chin at Luther Dodd. "His fingers are like old wood, and so's his heart. He could go on me any night. And if he does, I'll have to shut down. Without a horn man, there's no Creole sound, no tradition at all. Without a horn, this place of mine,

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which is the last of the great jazz emporiums, will just give way to"—Gaston shrugged helplessly, "—whatever. Disco music, I suppose."

A shudder circuited George Tennell's spine, but he gave no outward sign of it. His body was absolutely still, his hands resting motionlessly on the snow-white tablecloth, eyes steadily fixed on Luther Dodd. Momentarily the band went into its first number, *Lafayette,* played Kansas City style after the way of Bennie Moten. The music pulsed out like spurts of water, each burst overlapping the one before it to create an even wave of sound that flooded the big room. Because Kansas City style was so rhythmic and highly danceable, some of the early diners immediately moved onto the dance floor and fell in with the music.

Ordinarily, Tennell liked to watch people dance while he ate; the moving bodies lent emphasis to the music he loved so much, music he had first heard from the window of the St. Pierre Colored Orphanage on Decatur Street when he had been a boy; music he had grown up with and would have made his life a part of if he had not been so completely talentless, so inept that he could not even read sharps and flats. But tonight he paid no attention to the couples out in front of the bandstand. He concentrated only on Luther Dodd and the old horn man's breath intake as he played. It was clear to Tennell that Luther was struggling for breath, fighting for every note he blew, utilizing every cubic inch of lung power that his old body could marshal.

After watching Luther all the way through *Lafayette,* and halfway through *Davenport Blues,* Tennell looked across the table at Gaston and nodded.

"All right," he said simply. "All right."

For the first time ever Tennell left the club without eating dinner.

As Dix walked along with old Rainey toward Gaston's club, Rainey kept pointing out places to him that he had not exactly forgotten, but had not remembered in a long time.

"That house there," Rainey said, "was where Paul Mares was born back in nineteen-and-oh-one. He's the one formed the original New Orleans Rhythm Kings. He only lived to be forty-eight but he was one of the best horn men of all time."

Dix would remember, not necessarily the person himself but the house and the story of the person and how good he was. He had grown up on those stories, gone to sleep by them as a boy, lived the

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lives of the men in them many times over as he himself was being taught to blow trumpet by Rozell "The Lip" Page when Page was already past 60 and he, Dix, was only eight. Later, when Page died, Dix's education was taken over by Shepherd Norden and Blue Johnny Meadows, the two alternating as his teacher between their respective road tours. With Page, Norden, and Meadows in his background, it was no wonder that Dix could blow traditional.

"Right up the street there," Rainey said as they walked, "is where Wingy Manone was born in nineteen-and-oh-four. His given name was Joseph, but after his accident ever'body taken to calling him 'Wingy.' The accident was, he fell under a street car and lost his right arm. But that boy didn't let a little thing like that worry him none, no sir. He learned to play trumpet *left-handed,* and *one-handed.* And he was *good.* Lord, he was good."

They walked along Dauphin and Chartres and Royal. All around them were the French architecture and grillework and statuary and vines and moss that made the *Vieux Carre* a world unto itself, a place of subtle sights, sounds, and smells—black and white and fish and age—that no New Orleans tourist, no Superdome visitor, no casual observer, could ever experience, because to experience was to understand, and understanding of the Quarter could not be acquired, it had to be lived.

"Tommy Ladnier, he used to live right over there," Rainey said, "right up on the second floor. He lived there when he came here from his hometown of Mandeville, Loozey-ana. Poor Tommy, he had a short life too, only thirty-nine years. But it was a good life. He played with King Oliver and Fletcher Henderson and Sidney Bechet. Yessir, he got in some good licks."

When they got close enough to Tradition Hall to hear the music, at first faintly, then louder, clearer, Rainey stopped talking. He wanted Dix to hear the music, to *feel* the sound of it as it wafted out over Pirate's Alley and the Café du Monde and Congo Square (they called it Beauregard Square now, but Rainey refused to recognize the new name). Instinctively, Rainey knew that it was important for the music to get back into Dix, to saturate his mind and catch in his chest and tickle his stomach. There were some things in Dix that needed to be washed out, some bad things, and Rainey was certain that the music would help. A good purge was always healthy.

Rainey was grateful, as they got near enough to define melody, that *Sweet Georgia Brown* was being played. It was a good melody to come home to.

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They walked on, listening, and after a while Dix asked, "Who's on horn?"

"Luther Dodd."

"Don't sound like Luther. What's the matter with him?"

Rainey waved one hand resignedly. "Old. Dying, I 'spect."

They arrived at the Hall and went inside. Gaston met them with a smile. "Dix," he said, genuinely pleased, "it's good to see you." His eyes flicked over Dix. "The years have been good to you. Trim. Lean. No gray hair. How's your lip?"

"I don't have a lip no more, Mr. Gaston," said Dix. "Haven't had for years."

"But he can get it back quick enough," Rainey put in. "He gots a natural lip."

"I don't play no more, Mr. Gaston," Dix told the club owner.

"That's too bad," Gaston said. He bobbed his head toward the stairs. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

Dix and Rainey followed Gaston upstairs to his private office. The office was furnished the way Gaston dressed—old-style, roaring Twenties. There was even a wind-up Victrola in the corner.

Gaston worked the combination of a large, ornate floor vault and pulled its big-tiered door open. From somewhere in its dark recess he withdrew a battered trumpet case, one of the very old kind with heavy brass fittings on the corners and, one knew, real velvet, not felt, for a lining. Placing it gently in the center of his desk, Gaston carefully opened the snaplocks and lifted the top. Inside, indeed on real velvet, deep-purple real velvet, was a gleaming, silver, hand-etched trumpet. Dix and Rainey stared at it in unabashed awe.

"Know who it once belonged to?" Gaston asked.

Neither Dix nor Rainey replied. They were mesmerized by the instrument. Rainey had not seen one like it in 50 years. Dix had *never* seen one like it; he had only heard stories about the magnificent silver horns that the quadroons made of contraband silver carefully hidden away after the War Between the States. Because the silver cache had not, as it was supposed to, been given over to the Federal army as part of the reparations levied against the city, the quadroons, during the Union occupation, had to be very careful what they did with it. Selling it for value was out of the question. Using it for silver service, candlesticks, walking canes, or any other of the more obvious uses would have attracted the notice of a Union informer. But letting it lie dormant, even though it was safer as such, was intolerable to the quads, who refused to let a day go by

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without circumventing one law or another.

So they used the silver to plate trumpets and cornets and slide trombones that belonged to the tabernacle musicians who were just then beginning to experiment with the old *Sammsamounn* tribal music that would eventually mate with work songs and prison songs and gospels, and evolve into traditional blues, which would evolve into traditional, or Dixie-style, jazz.

"Look at the initials," Gaston said, pointing to the top of the bell. Dix and Rainey peered down at three initials etched in the silver: BRB.

"Lord have mercy," Rainey whispered. Dix's lips parted as if he too intended to speak, but no words sounded.

"That's right," Gaston said. "Blind Ray Blount. The first, the best, the *only*. Nobody has ever touched the sounds he created. That man hit notes nobody ever heard before—or since. He was the master."

"Amen," Rainey said. He nodded his head toward Dix. "Can he touch it?"

"Go ahead," Gaston said to Dix.

Like a pilgrim to Mecca touching the holy shroud, Dix ever so lightly placed the tips of three fingers on the silver horn. As he did, he imagined he could feel the touch left there by the hands of the amazing blind horn man who had started the great blues evolution in a patch of town that later became Storyville. He imagined that—

"It's yours if you want it," Gaston said. "All you have to do is pick it up and go downstairs and start blowing."

Dix wet his suddenly dry lips. "Tomorrow I—"

"Not tomorrow," Gaston said. "Tonight. Now."

"Take it, boy," Rainey said urgently.

Dix frowned deeply, his eyes narrowing as if he felt physical pain. He swallowed, trying to push an image out of his mind; an image he had clung to for sixteen years. "I can't tonight—"

"Tonight or never," Gaston said firmly.

"For God's sake, boy, take it!" said old Rainey.

But Dix could not. The image of Madge would not let him.

Dix shook his head violently, as if to rid himself of devils, and hurried from the room.

Rainey ran after him and caught up with him a block from the Hall. "Don't do it," he pleaded. "Hear me now. I'm an old man and I know I ain't worth nothin' to nobody, but I'm begging you, boy, please, please, please don't do it. I ain't never axed you for nothing

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in my whole life, but I'm axing you for this: *please* don't do it."

"I got to," Dix said quietly. "It ain't that I want to; I *got* to."

"But why, boy? *Why?*"

"Because we made a promise to each other," Dix said. "That night in that Texas motel room, the man Madge was with had told her he was going to marry her. He'd been telling her that for a long time. But he was already married and kept putting off leaving his wife. Finally Madge had enough of it. She asked me to come to her room between sets. I knew she was just doing it to make him jealous, but it didn't matter none to me. I'd been crazy about her for so long that I'd do anything she asked me to, and she knew it.

"So between sets I slipped across the highway to where she had her room. But he was already there. I could hear through the transom that he was roughing her up some, but the door was locked and I couldn't get in. Then I heard a shot and everything got quiet. A minute later Madge opened the door and let me in. The man was laying across the bed dying. Madge started bawling and saying how they would put her in the pen and how she wouldn't be able to stand it, she'd go crazy and kill herself.

"It was then I asked her if she'd wait for me if I took the blame for her. She promised me she would. And I promised her I'd come back to her." Dix sighed quietly. "That's what I'm doing, Rainey—keeping my promise."

"And what going to happen if she ain't kept *hers*?" Rainey asked.

"Mamma Rulat asked me the same thing this afternoon when I asked her where Madge was at." Mamma Rulat was an octaroon fortuneteller who always knew where everyone in the Quarter lived.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her I'd do what I had to do. That's all a man *can* do, Rainey."

Dix walked away, up a dark side street. Rainey, watching him go, shook his head in the anguish of the aged and helpless.

"Lord, Lord, Lord—"

The house on Burgundy Street had once been a grand mansion with 30 rooms and a tiled French courtyard with a marble fountain in its center. It had seen nobility and aristocracy and great generals come and go with elegant, genteel ladies on their arms. Now the thirty rooms were rented individually with hotplate burners for light cooking, and the only ladies who crossed the courtyard were those of the New Orleans night.

A red light was flashing atop a police car when Dix got there, and

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uniformed policemen were blocking the gate into the courtyard. There was a small curious crowd talking about what happened.

"A doper named LeBeau," someone said. "He's been shot."

"I heared it," an old man announced. "I heared the shot."

"There's where it happened, that window right up there—"

Dix looked up, but as he did another voice said, "They're bringing him out now!"

Two morgue attendants wheeled a sheet-covered gurney across the courtyard and lifted it into the back of a black panel truck. Several policemen, led by big beefy George Tennell, brought a woman out and escorted her to the car with the flashing red light. Dix squinted, focusing on her in the inadequate courtyard light. He frowned. Madge's mother, he thought, his mind going back two decades. What's Madge's mother got to do with this?

Then he remembered. Madge's mother was dead. She had died five years after he had gone to the pen.

Then who—?

Madge?

Yes, it *was* her. It was Madge. Older, as he was. Not a girl any more, as he was not a boy any more. For a moment he found it difficult to equate the woman in the courtyard with the memory in his mind. But it was Madge, all right.

Dix tried to push forward, to get past the gate into the courtyard, but two policemen held him back. George Tennell saw the altercation and came over.

"She's under arrest, mister," Tennell told Dix. "Can't nobody talk to her but a lawyer right now."

"What's she done anyhow?" Dix asked.

"Killed her boy friend," said Tennell. "Shot him with this."

He showed Dix a pearl-handled over-and-under Derringer two-shot.

"Her boy friend?"

Tennell nodded. "Young feller. 'Bout twenty-five. Neighbors say she was partial to young fellers. Some women are like that."

"Who says she shot him?"

"I do. I was in the building at the time, on another matter. I heard the shot. Matter of fact, I was the first one to reach the body. Few minutes later she come waltzing in. Oh, she put on a good act, all right, like she didn't even know what happened. But I found the gun in her purse myself."

By now the other officers had Madge Noble in the police car and

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were waiting for Tennell. He slipped the Derringer into his coat pocket and hitched up his trousers. Jutting his big jaw out an inch, he fixed Dix in a steady gaze.

"If she's a friend of yours, don't count on her being around for a spell. She'll do a long time for this."

Tennell walked away, leaving Dix still outside the gate. Dix waited there, watching, as the police car came through to the street. He tried to catch a glimpse of Madge as it passed, but there was not enough light in the back seat where they had her. As soon as the car left, the people who had gathered around began to leave too.

Soon Dix was the only one standing there.

At midnight George Tennell was back at his usual table in Tradition Hall for the dinner he had missed earlier. Gaston came over and joined him. For a few minutes they sat in silence, watching Dix up on the bandstand. He was blowing the silver trumpet that had once belonged to Blind Ray Blount; sitting next to the aging Luther Dodd; jumping in whenever he could as they played *Tailspin Blues,* then *Tank Town Bump,* then *Everybody Loves My Baby.*

"Sounds like he'll be able to get his lip back pretty quick," Tennell observed.

"Sure," said Gaston. "He's a natural. Rozell Page was his first teacher, you know."

"No, I didn't know that."

"Sure." Gaston adjusted the celluloid collar he wore, and turned the diamond stickpin in his tie. "What about the woman?" he asked.

Tennell shrugged. "She'll get twenty years. Probably do ten or eleven."

Gaston thought for a moment, then said, "That should be time enough. After ten or eleven years nothing will matter to him except the music. Don't you think?"

"It won't even take that long," Tennell guessed. "Not for him."

Up on the bandstand the men who played traditional went into *Just a Closer Walk With Thee.*

And sitting on the sawdust floor behind the bandstand, old Rainey listened with happy tears in his eyes.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Mrs. Craggs story by

H. R. F. KEATING

Mrs. Craggs, our favorite charwoman-criminologist, uses six senses to solve mysteries—her five physical senses and common sense. This time it's mostly her sight—she is an eyewitness, so to speak, to "one of the great mysteries of our time". . .

THE LOCKED BATHROOM

by H. R. F. KEATING

Mrs. Craggs had very often nearly left the cleaning job she had with Mrs. Marchpane, of Fitzjames Avenue. But somehow, for some reason or no reason, she stayed on week after week. And so she was there, a witness, when in that luxury flat—as later the newspaper headline writers were to insist on calling it—there occured one of the great mysteries of our time. Or, anyhow, a mystery. And one that made the papers for nearly two weeks.

Certainly Mrs. Craggs had no regard at all for her employer, silly, gabbling Mrs. Marchpane, wife of Squadron Leader John (Jumping Jack) Marchpane, retired. Every other week at least, when it came to the Friday, the second of the two days on which she "did" for Mrs. Marchpane, she had been on the point of saying "Sorry, madam, but I shan't be able to oblige after next Friday," and then she had said nothing. It might, to some extent, have been because of the Squadron Leader. There he was, a hero, called "Jumping Jack" in the war because he had had to bail out on 23 different occasions and had gone back to pilot another Spitfire next day every single time. But now he was retired with only a bit of a job to keep himself occupied and spending all the rest of his time being given orders by Mrs. Marchpane. And ridiculous orders, too, often as not.

So, although the Squadron Leader was always very nice to her,

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never failing to ask about her rheumatism—and listening to her reply—producing a little bunch of flowers when he discovered it was her birthday and sending her a card at Christmas, she could not help mingling her liking for him with a little half-contemptuous pity.

The trouble was that Mrs. Marchpane was such a fusspot. Everything had to be just right for her. If the frail figurines on the sitting-room mantelpiece were not each one at its exactly accustomed angle when Mrs. Craggs had finished dusting, it was as if the whole fabric of society had been made to totter. If each one of Mrs. Marchpane's delicately scented toilet articles was not in its exact place on the shelf in front of the bathroom mirror, to a hair's-breadth, it was as if the very foundations of the ever-spinning world had been lifted up and moved. If after Mrs. Craggs had taken the vacuum cleaner over the hall carpet the Squadron Leader was forgetful enough to walk across it and leave footmarks in the immaculate pile, it was as if someone had impiously challenged the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England and had to be rushed to the stake forthwith.

Yet Mrs. Craggs stayed on. Which did at least mean she was there on the day of the Great Locked Bathroom Mystery.

It happened just after she had finished the hall carpet, a task Mrs. Marchpane liked done first of all. Both the Squadron Leader and his wife were in the bathroom. They did not get up early, and it was very much a regular thing that the Squadron Leader should be taking his shower at this time. Mrs. Marchpane insisted—of course—that any husband of hers should shower each morning and she even timed her own 20 minutes spent at the bathroom basin to coincide with his. She insisted too that he should have a complete change of clothes each day, in summer even putting his lightweight trousers into the Ali Baba dirty-linen basket in the corner of the bathroom.

And hair. What a fuss she made about hair caught in the bath wastepipe.

You'd think, Mrs. Craggs used to murmur to herself whenever she heard from the other side of the locked bathroom door that unending sing-song voice, poor old Jumping Jack's hairs were great poisonous tropical wrigglies, the palaver she's making. "Really, John, if I've asked you once I've asked you a thousand times." Mrs. Marchpane never called her hero husband by any other less dignified name than John. "Really, John, I can't have the charwoman finding hair in the plug-hole." Though Mrs. Craggs's own feelings were that

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life made its share of muck, and muck had got to be cleared up.

But on this memorable day, just as she had switched off the vacuum cleaner, she heard from behind the bathroom door, not a comparatively restrained rebuke, but a sudden ear-shattering scream.

"Gone. Gone. He's gone. He's gone."

Then there came the sound of the bolt on the door being banged back with desperate force and the next second Mrs. Marchpane came rushing out full pelt into the hall.

At first Mrs. Craggs thought the Squadron Leader must have had a heart attack as he stood there in the shower. But Mrs. Marchpane's next shrill words dissipated the notion in an instant.

"He's disappeared. John. My John. He's gone. He's vanished."

"What you mean 'gone'?" Mrs. Craggs was eventually forced to shout sharply into Mrs. Marchpane's ear.

"Mrs. Craggs, my husband. He was there in the shower. I was looking at him in the mirror. I was massaging my face. Then—then I looked again and he wasn't—he wasn't there, Mrs. Craggs."

And the good lady burst into such a howl of tears that Mrs. Craggs could do nothing else but guide her into the kitchen, ease her down onto a chair at the table, and hastily put a light under the kettle for that universal remedy, a good strong cup of tea.

"There, there," she said. "You'll be all right, dear. He can't of gone. Not *gone*. You just didn't see him, that's all."

But she knew at that moment that these were no more than mere words of comfort. Because the plain fact of the matter was that, standing in front of the bathroom mirror, you could see plainly and fully right to the back of the sort of sentry box made by the shower curtain at the far end of the bath. She had often noticed this herself when she had cleaned the glass shelf over the wash basin and was making sure that each one of Mrs. Marchpane's toilet articles was back in its exact place.

At last she saw with relief that the kettle had boiled. She tumbled hot water into the teapot, poured a quick cup—it wouldn't be very strong, but at least it would be hot—and put it in front of Mrs. Marchpane.

But already that lady was beginning to recover.

"Tea?" she exclaimed. "In the kitchen? What can you be thinking of? I'll be in the sitting room. In the sitting room, Mrs. Craggs."

She rose to her feet, somewhat unsteadily.

"Oh, no, you won't," Mrs. Craggs said, her voice exactly mingling sternness and kindliness. "You'll sit just there where you are and

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swaller that cup right down. A nasty shock you've 'ad, an' tea you need."

And she even planted her sturdy legs squarely in front of the kitchen door to stop her employer from getting up and opening it.

Mrs. Marchpane, to Mrs. Craggs's relief, seemed to lack enough of her customary hammering willpower to resist. She fell back on to the kitchen chair and began to sip the hot liquid.

"Now," said Mrs. Craggs, "I'll just go along to that old bathroom an' see what all this is about."

She marched off, not without urgency, neglecting indeed in this emergency to take care to walk round and not across the hall carpet.

But, true enough, in the bathroom there was no sign of the Squadron Leader. And when, joined by Mrs. Marchpane, she looked through all the rest of the flat, there was still not the faintest trace of him to be found.

It had been some time before Mrs. Craggs allowed her employer to go to the length of telephoning the police. But in the end she had had to agree to that portentous step. And that had been the start of a process that had gone on for at least the two weeks during which the mysterious disappearance had made the national press. A series of ever more important police officers had one by one confessed themselves baffled. Fingerprint experts, photographers, Geiger counters, stethoscopes—all had been used, but none had helped.

At last the mystery entered the history books, and Mrs. Craggs brought herself to utter the words she had wanted to say ever since her first week of employment at the flat in Fitzjames Avenue, "Sorry, madam, but I shan't be able to oblige after next Friday."

Even her friend Mrs. Milhorne, who had pestered her night and morning for new details of the affair—and had had to be content with meagre pickings indeed—at last transferred her riotous imagination to the latest Hollywood scandal.

Until just a week before Christmas, nearly six months later.

That was when Mrs. Craggs received a particularly splendid Christmas card. Even if it was one not particularly in the spirit of Yuletide, consisting as it did of a reproduced painting of that hallowed air-war machine of old, the Spitfire.

Mrs. Milhorne, dropping in for a chat and a cup of tea, took it from the mantelpiece, without asking, and looked inside.

"From Jack Mayglass—and Jill," she read aloud. "Who's he then? I didn't know you knew any Jack Mayglass."

Mrs. Craggs pondered for a moment.

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"Well," she said at last, "I don't suppose it matters if I tell you now, in confidence like. I don't know no Jack May-glass. But I used ter know a John March-pane."

"John March—the Great Locked Bathroom Mystery?"

"Locked bathroom. That bathroom weren't locked fer very long," Mrs. Craggs said. "It weren't locked from the moment that silly cow unbolted it when she thought her poor long-suffering hubby had disappeared."

"But he *had* disappeared. It said so in the papers."

"Oh, yes. He disappeared all right. Then. Disappeared from a dog's life, to start up somewhere new. Walked right out o' that bathroom 'e did, soon as I 'appened to take his missus into the kitchen an' shut the door behind me. Stuck on 'is shirt an' trousers what 'e took out o' that Ali Baba basket where he'd just put 'em, an' walked right out o' the house. An' jolly good luck to 'im."

"Yes," said Mrs. Milhorne slowly. "Yes, I can see that. I can see he might of been driven to that, driven by a force greater than what he was. But what I can't see is, how he wasn't there when she looked for him in that mirror."

"Easy," said Mrs. Craggs. "Hair."

"Hair? What you mean 'hair'?"

"He must of been cleaning 'is hair out o' the plug-'ole," Mrs. Craggs answered. "Like what she was always on an' on at him to do. Crouched down 'e must of been ter hoick the stuff out. An' just then the silly cow would've looked back in the mirror again an' not seen 'im. 'Course she wouldn't, not with 'im tucked away beneath 'er sight the way 'e was an' with that curtain there an' all. But what's she do? Blows 'er top straight away, goes rushing to the door, yanks open that bolt, comes yelling up ter me an' clasps me in 'er arms like what we was Rudy Valentino an' Mary Pickford. An' then it must of come to 'im. This was his chance. His sudden chance. An' 'e took it."

Mrs. Milhorne looked at the card with the picture of the sunlit Spitfire on it.

"But you knew," she said suddenly. "You must of known all along."

"Well, not quite all along. But I did 'ear some little noises in the 'all while we was in the kitchen, an' I knew then I'd better keep that dratted woman in there. An' it was a good thing I did. Footsteps all across the 'all carpet there was. 'Ad to tread on 'em meself to blot 'em out. Couldn't 'ave the Great Locked Bathroom Mystery come to an end before it'd really begun, could I?"

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a *NEW* Uncle Abner story by

JOHN F. SUTER

"The Lord has assigned different talents to different men." To Uncle Abner, Virginia squire of the Jeffersonian era and great champion of justice, the Lord has given eyes that truly see, ears that truly hear, and a brain that truly reasons . . .

THE FAIRY RING

by JOHN F. SUTER

In the span of his life, which was long, my Uncle Abner seemed to favor the old Hebrew code of retribution. This was not so. He never favored an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, as a proper measure. Mortal justice was a thing granted, to be applied carefully and wisely. It was not something seized willfully and made a tool of emotion.

It was a hot day in early August. I was in my uncle's barn watching him saddle his great chestnut horse. Abner was concerned about riding the horse in the sticky weather, for the animal was no longer young. There was a colt which would some day be the twin of this one, but it was not yet old enough to ride.

"If it were anything but a missing child," said my uncle, "I should stay here. The day is too hot."

A shadow fell across the floor where the sun streamed through the open doorway.

"It is not even that simple, Abner," said a voice which I recognized as Squire Randolph's.

Mopping his florid face, Randolph stepped inside. When he did so, his prominent nose wrinkled, and he sneezed, as he inhaled the dust of the hay.

Abner adjusted the reins and looped them around the pommel of

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the saddle. He turned his attention from the horse to his visitor.

"James Kirk was here half an hour ago," he said. "He told me that every man who could do so was being asked to join in a hunt for the Lang child, who is missing. I intend to go. So does Martin."

"I would not change that," Randolph answered. "However, there is something you should know." He saw my uncle glance at me, and he added, "Yes, I trust Martin."

"I always did," said Abner, "and he is eighteen now."

"You will remember that Flora Lang first came here with the boy two years ago. He was four then," said Randolph. "A widow, she said. Most of that is true, but not all."

My uncle's eyes narrowed. "Randolph, are you about to say that the boy's father is still alive and might have made off with him?"

Randolph wagged a finger. "No, no. I know nothing which says that the woman is not a widow. However, she is not Flora Lang. She is Flora MacGregor."

Seeing that he had Abner's interest, Randolph continued, "The day after the woman arrived, she came to me to tell me a secret. She was newly arrived from Scotland. Indeed, she and the child were fugitives. You have heard of the blood feuds of Scotland?"

"I have," replied Abner, "but I had hoped they were a thing of the past."

"Not entirely," sighed Randolph. "You know that we still have occasional outbreaks of feuds in our own hills. Apparently it can still happen back there. And so it did between some of the MacGregors and a branch of the Campbells. According to Flora, her family was innocent of any offense, but this did not prevent the Campbells from avenging a fancied wrong. They killed her husband, his parents, and his unmarried brother. She and the child were marked, as well, but they escaped and came to America. She came here as a likely spot where a pursuer would not think to look."

"I see," Abner said. "She chose to tell one responsible person her secret, in case some enemy should come here. You were that person. Now you think that the time to share the secret might have come."

"Yes," said Randolph.

"Which others have you told?"

"None, nor will I. However, if you want your brother Rufus to know, I should not object."

Abner nodded. "After all, children have strayed before. We have not seen a stranger in weeks. It would help nothing to spread this tale."

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He led his horse outside, where my own mount was tethered under a tree beside Randolph's gig. The three of us were silent as we prepared to depart.

I looked about, knowing what we were all thinking. Around us were the hills. We could dwell in them, raise crops among them, drink the fine, clear water which flowed from them. We could take game from their woodlands and fish from their streams. They were a bulwark and protection. They offered a promise of freedom.

At the same time there was a price to be paid.

The Indians were long gone as a danger. Mountain lions were fewer and roamed only among the great mountains to the east. But there were still bears among the hills. There were still rattlesnakes and copperheads. There were still quicksands in marshy areas.

The price was twofold: vigilance and an acknowledgment of the place the Lord had assigned the dweller in these hills.

But what could a child know of this price?

We had just arrived at the road which Abner and I were to take to the area we intended to cover when an unusual sound struck our ears. It was clearly made by some kind of dog, but it seemed between a yelp and a bark, at a deeper pitch.

I looked down the road, in the direction where Flora MacGregor and her child lived. Around a bend not far away came a group of men. The one in the lead was holding the leash of a large dog such as I had never seen. It was this animal which was making the noise.

The beast was tan in color, stood between two and three feet in height, and looked to have the weight of an average youth. It had very long ears, and the skin of its head was loose and wrinkled. When it lifted its head from the ground which it was sniffing, I was looking at two of the saddest brown eyes I have ever seen.

"What is that?" I asked my uncle.

"I have heard of that dog," he replied. "It belongs to Abel Fisher. They call it a bloodhound."

Randolph leaned from his gig. "I neglected to mention that Fisher had been asked to try the beast in this search. It is a hunting dog of an unusual kind."

"So I have heard," said Abner. "It is said that the animal can track a human being if it is allowed to take the scent from something that person wears."

"What do you think?" Randolph asked.

Abner watched the oncoming group. "The Lord has assigned different talents to different men. There is no reason to suppose that

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this was not done for animals."

By this time the group had come up to us. Randolph was watching the big dog with some concern.

"Fisher," he said to the animal's owner, "it is only a small child we want to find. Can you control that beast when it reaches the trail's end?"

The dog's master was tall and broad-faced. He laughed at Randolph's question. "Squire, don't you be fooled by what they call that critter. That's the gentlest dog there is. He finds what he's after, but he leaves it up to you after that." He stooped and patted the dog's shoulder. "That's right, ain't it, Rex?"

I was interested in this, but when I looked up, I saw that one of the other men had urged his horse up to Abner's.

It was Storm, the old country doctor. There was a look of urgency on his lined, withered face.

Storm leaned close to Abner and began to talk in a low voice. I could not hear, but I thought I heard him say, ". . . make . . . an orphan . . ."

My uncle saw me looking at them. "Martin," he said, "it is too hot to sit there waiting. Go on. I can follow later."

Randolph clearly preferred to go with the group, but he shook the reins and started his gig in the other direction. "If the child is found," he said as he drove off, "he will want his mother quickly. I'll go for her."

Those of us who went with the dog moved at a good pace, although not always on the road. Sometimes the trail took us off on cowpaths in nearby meadows, sometimes through small patches of woods.

Finally, after passing several farms, we came to the Donovan property.

This was a small place owned by Patrick Donovan, who had raised pigs when he lived. He had been a small, merry man, much-liked. He had died of pneumonia two winters back, and his widow, Kate, lived there alone. She had sold off the pigs and made her living selling herbs and natural medicines. For her needs, she had a cow, a small garden, and some poultry.

I liked her and delighted to hear her tell of properties her herbs were supposed to possess, beyond their known uses. Not everyone had this same view. Some thought her half mad, others thought she had powers she should not have.

I was reminded of this when the dog drew close to the Donovan house.

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The beast approached Donovan's place from the west, by the road, and turned in at the fence line, still baying. Then, a hundred feet from the side yard, it came to the thing which raised more suspicion against Kate Donovan than any other.

The fairy ring.

This was a perfectly circular patch of grass perhaps 50 feet across which was a darker color than the grass around it. No one could explain it. Kate swore that neither she nor Patrick had ever planted it that way. But someone had seen another like it and named it: a fairy ring.

The image of fairies dancing on this spot in the moonlight was a wonder to me even now. This fancy did not appeal to everyone. Some dismissed it as nonsense. Others were uncomfortable and did not want to hear it. For them, it brought visions of things they did not want to know.

The dog started across the ring, and a strange thing happened. In the center, he stopped.

Instead of baying, the animal began to whine. He moved to and fro aimlessly, then looked up at his master.

Fisher looked at one of us, then another. "I don't know any more about this than anybody. It looks like he's lost the scent. Maybe if you'd all get away from him and give him a chance—"

We were all glad to withdraw. The heat and the dust made the shade of a big elm in the yard an attractive place to be. It seemed so to me as I sat there smelling a stalk of crushed sage I had picked up.

We were sitting on the grass watching Fisher trying to start the dog in different directions when Uncle Abner and Doctor Storm rode up. We explained Fisher's problem.

"Fisher," called my uncle, "take the dog to the road and let him come in once more."

This was done, and the dog stepped again where he had before. My uncle dismounted and walked to the spot. He knelt and studied the ground.

"At least the ground has not been disturbed," he said.

Fisher's mouth thinned. "That is a poor joke, Abner," he said.

My uncle's expression was grave. "I was not joking," he answered.

Fisher wiped his face with his sleeve. "If I believe the dog, the child would either be under the ground or he took wings. I've only had Rex a month. I don't know what mistakes he can make."

There was a noise of a door opening, and a woman's voice called.

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"What are you men doing out there on a day like this?"

We all looked around.

Kate Donovan, a smallish, plump woman with fading brown hair stood at the side of her front stoop.

Uncle Abner explained about the search and what Fisher was doing with the dog. "Have you seen the boy?" he asked.

"I have not," she replied. "From what you tell me, he must have been snatched up before I had that chance." She gestured toward the fairy ring.

At that, there was some uneasiness among us. We had felt it when the dog stopped tracking the boy. There was an unspoken question.

The dog had testified that the child had entered the fairy ring. How had he left it?

"If you will all get into the shade," Kate Donovan said, "you might think better. I'll bring out a crock of mint tea to cool you off."

We had scarcely all followed her advice when she was back with a stone crock of cool liquid. Just as quickly, she disappeared and returned with mugs. With Fisher's permission, she led the hound to an old basin near her well, where the beast lapped gratefully at some water.

Because it was so hot, each of us drank slowly of the cool tea, to make it last. The fumes of the mint were as refreshing as the liquid itself.

Uncle Abner was drinking as carefully as the rest of us. Suddenly he paused. He inhaled the vapor of the tea, then looked up.

"Kate," he called, "have you an abundance of herbs just now?"

"Some," she answered. "What did you want?"

"Get me one sprig of whatever grows closest to that circle."

She led the dog back to Fisher and set about getting the plants. Before long she gave my uncle several assorted stalks. "There you are," she said. "Mint, thyme, marjoram, sage, and rosemary."

Abner took the plants and smelled each in turn after rubbing a leaf gently between thumb and forefinger. He kept all of them, discarding none.

"Fisher," he said, "your dog tracks by a scent which has been offered him, does he not?"

"That's right."

"Then, if that scent were covered by one more powerful, it would confuse him?"

Fisher was puzzled. "I don't know. I wasn't told of that when I bought him."

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Uncle Abner gestured toward the fairy ring. "Let us make a test. Bring the dog here."

When Fisher complied, Abner took his handkerchief and placed a stalk of mint in one corner and carefully crushed it. He held the cloth before the dog's nose.

"Now take him to the center of the circle," he said.

Fisher did so.

The dog put his nose to the ground, but he made no move to leave the ring.

The failure did not perturb my uncle. He called Fisher back four more times and repeated the test with the other four herbs, crushed in different portions of his handkerchief.

In no test, however, did the dog respond to the new scent offered to him.

"That was interesting," said Kate Donovan from behind us. "Now, may I ask a question? What is the child's name?"

"Lang," I spoke up. "Jimmie Lang."

"Thank you, Martin," she said. She stepped forward into the open and threw back her head. "Jimmie! Jim-mm-ee! Jim-mm-ee! Jimmie Lang!"

She repeated it facing in every direction. On many another day the hills would have rung with the sound, but on this one the air was heavy and dead.

Uncle Abner and Fisher came back to the rest of us. Fisher tied the dog to the tree. Abner looked toward Kate.

"That is the sensible thing. That is what we must do."

We were getting to our feet when there was a clatter of hoofs and a sound of wheels. Along the road came Randolph's gig, with a woman sitting as passenger. Randolph drew up at Donovan's gate and tethered his horses there.

As she alighted from the gig, I could see that the woman was the child's mother, Flora—Lang or MacGregor, whichever she was. She was a tall woman, strikingly handsome. Her deep red hair was in some disarray, but she seemed not to care as she ran across the yard.

"Have you found him? Have you found Jimmie?" she cried as she came up to us.

My uncle looked at her with compassion. "We have not. We know that he came this far, and we are preparing to search in several directions beyond here."

She grasped his arm. "He came here? He came to this house? Then he did not leave it!"

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Uncle Abner studied her. "Why do you say that?"

"Because she consults with the creatures of darkness!" the woman cried, pointing at Kate Donovan. "You see the fairy ring? And what are they, the fairies? What are they but angels which fell from Heaven along with Satan! She knows all their arts!"

Kate Donovan shook her head. "The poor woman's out of her head with worry."

Abel Fisher gave her a curious look. "Her child strayed into the fairy ring and did not walk out again."

"Is that true?" the mother wailed, turning again to Uncle Abner.

"If you believe the dog," he answered gravely.

Randolph had joined us, listening. Flora MacGregor turned to him.

"You have the authority. Search this place. I want my boy found. She has him hidden somewhere. I know she has."

Randolph hesitated, but Kate Donovan spoke up.

"Search anywhere you like. I have nothing to hide. If I'd even seen the lad, I'd have told you at once." She turned to the mother. "You're beside yourself, Flora. There's no bad blood between us. Come inside and watch while they search."

The younger woman drew herself up. "I'll come inside, but it's you I'll watch. I know that you've done something to my boy, and I know why."

The group broke up as Randolph dispatched them here and there. Uncle Abner, Dr. Storm, and I went into the house with the two women while the others searched the outbuildings.

I had always enjoyed being in the Donovan house after Patrick died. Before then, the odor of pigs lurked everywhere, although it was usually only a trace. After the pigs were gone, there was such a blend of plant odors that I always wanted just to sit and smell, rather than talk.

In every room, I knew, Kate kept a pot-pourri. On the stove, she might be preparing an extract of roots of sweet cicely as a mild stimulant for some old person. Occasionally she would be preparing an oil from nasturtium seeds for aching muscles. Her modest, but sturdy, furniture always had a soft glow. Oil of lavender did this, lending a pleasant fragrance.

I noticed Uncle Abner's face soften as we stepped inside. The house was working its charm on him, I thought.

He was looking up at a sprig of mistletoe hanging just inside the door.

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"Guests in this house are safe," he said. "Under that sign, Flora, do you still say that your boy is hidden here?"

"Wickedness can put on any face it likes," she answered, her eyes flashing.

"Sit down, then," he said, indicating a rocker in a corner of the sitting-room. "Let us look. Storm, stay with her."

At his bidding, Kate Donovan took us about the house, which was only one-story, with a small attic, a cellar, and a tool shed attached to the rear of the kitchen. We went from room to room, searching scrupulously, but finding nothing.

When we inspected the tool shed, I thought that we really might come to the end of the search, there were so many dark corners, so many stacks of tools. The silent, inanimate things were all we found.

"Look," I said to my uncle, pointing to a bunch of stalks hanging by the door, "that is yarrow. She keeps it there as a charm against thieves."

"She keeps it there as a matter of foresight in a tool shed," he replied. "It arrests bleeding if a cut or bruise occurs."

We returned to the sitting-room with Kate leading. Uncle Abner told Flora MacGregor of our fruitless search.

"However, we must wait for the others. While we do, you must tell me why you are certain that your boy is here."

The mother brushed at her red hair with a shaking hand. "Squire Randolph has informed me that he revealed to you my background."

"He did."

"Then ask her," she said, pointing to the older woman, "what her real name is."

Kate frowned, perplexed. "My name *is* my real name. Kate Donovan. Unless," she said slowly, "you mean my maiden name. That was Campbell."

"There!" Flora MacGregor cried. "You see! Campbell! Now do you understand?"

Uncle Abner started to speak, when there was a commotion outside, and Randolph came into the room.

"We have found nothing in the outbuildings. Not even a trace," he said.

Kate Donovan's calm face finally had taken on a look of stubbornness. "I understand none of this. What my name, Donovan or Campbell, has to do with it, I don't know. I do know that you'd best be out looking for that child, for it will storm within the hour."

Randolph looked out of the window. The sky was more gray than

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blue, but no thunderheads showed.

Momentarily, he forgot the immediate problem. "Kate," he said ponderously, "I refuse to believe that you have conjured up a storm to cover your tracks."

I knew what she meant. "No, she didn't," I said. "The jar told her."

I stepped back to the kitchen and brought in a large jar which Kate kept on the windowsill. In this jar there was a small amount of water into which a leech had been put. When the weather was calm, the repulsive creature lay quiet beneath the surface of the water. At the moment, it was at the top, almost out of the liquid, scurrying about.

Uncle Abner looked at it. "A dog which trails human beings. A creature which signals the weather the Lord is sending us. Fairies and fallen angels. I have half believed that the child had only strayed. There is too much weight against that for me to hold that belief any longer."

He turned about. "Randolph, you speak like sounding brass, not with the tongues of angels. I thank you for it. Is Fisher still here with his dog?"

Randolph flushed, uncertain of Abner's meaning. "He is. But I only said—"

"You spoke of covering tracks," said Abner. He then looked hard at Kate Donovan. "And you spoke, much earlier—give me one of your shoes."

Surprised, she hesitated and was about to protest. Then she shrugged, sat in a chair, and removed her right shoe.

He turned to face Flora MacGregor. "Now give me one of yours," he said. He spoke quietly, but only a fool would have defied his request.

She hesitated in confusion, then leaned over and complied. When she extended the shoe, Abner took it and quickly strode to the door.

"Randolph—Storm," he said, "stay with them. Martin, come with me."

The others, five in number, sat under the tree. They got to their feet when Abner strode toward them.

"Fisher," he said, "bring the dog."

When the large beast stood before him, Abner let him smell one of the shoes. The hound sniffed at it with interest.

"Now take him to the center of the circle," Abner directed.

Fisher did this, letting the dog cast about as it wished. Nothing

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unusual happened. Abner then repeated the test with the other shoe.

Suddenly the dog's interest was aroused. He began his familiar baying and trotted toward the edge of the circle which faced the back of Donovan's property.

"Let him follow where he wishes," Abner said. "Let him go as fast as he can. It will rain soon and wash out the scent."

I had long ago learned to trust my uncle, but now I was so confused that I could understand nothing. Perhaps all the hints of magic had numbed my mind. I gave up and went along with the search party.

If I was confused, the dog was not. He led us at a determined pace up to Donovan's back fence, through the gate, and along a tiny creek which flowed past into a small hollow. One side of the hollow had steep, high banks with numerous protruding stony ledges.

At the end where the flat ground tapered, the hound swerved away from the creek and behind a screen of laurel brushes. He then tried to climb the steep hillside.

We looked up. Just above head height was a ledge with a horizontal fissure under it. Our older neighbors often told us that Indians would shelter from the rain or a snowstorm in such a place.

"Look," said Uncle Abner, "someone has climbed to that ledge." He pointed to footmarks scuffed into the loose soil.

He gave us scant time to look before he was up the slope. The sweat pouring into my eyes until it nearly blinded me, I followed him.

There, in the rear of the crevice, where it was not easily seen from below, lay a small figure. I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled to it. It was a small boy with intense black hair and pale skin. He was tied hand and foot and gagged with a strip of cloth. Tears from his deep blue eyes had streaked the dust which covered his face and hair.

I touched his head gently. "It's all right, Jimmie," I said quietly. "We've come to take you out of this."

I took out my clasp knife and carefully cut him free. When I cut away the gag, he began to sob. Slowly, I pulled him forward and passed him to Uncle Abner, who gathered him up. The child sobbed things into his ear.

As we went back to the house, Abner gradually quieted the child, but he made no promises of any sort to him. Overhead, the sky was almost completely overcast. To the west it looked as though night was almost upon us. There was a twilight atmosphere. It was not

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a time for happy talk, although the boy might have needed it.

When we reached the Donovan house, Abner paused.

"Fisher," he said, "it would be wise if you and the others went home before the storm catches you. I intend to speak to Randolph about a reward for you. You deserve it. That is a good dog you have."

He put the child down. "Here, Jimmie," he said, "this is Rex. Tell him goodbye. He saved your life."

Abner picked the boy up again after he had patted the dog several times. We went into the house, where Flora MacGregor immediately started from her chair with a happy cry.

"You found him! You found him! Jimmie, Jimmie!"

A strange thing happened. The boy twisted in Abner's arms and began to cry loudly.

The mother stopped short. "Why, Jimmie, what is the matter?" He twisted farther from her.

She turned to glare at Kate Donovan. "You took him away and tried to kill him! With your evil spells you have also turned him against me!"

Uncle Abner gently handed the squirming, kicking child to me. He placed himself between the woman and me. His face was coated with a sheen of sweat, but it looked more like hewn stone glazed with ice.

"Kill?" he said. "That is a strange thing to say. The child left home alive. He returns alive. Where did you get a vision of death?"

She pointed again at Kate Donovan. "You heard. She is a Campbell. They have sworn to exterminate the MacGregors—the MacGregors, who once had a bounty on their heads, like wild animals! What else would she do but try to kill him?"

"It is true that the boy's life was in danger," said Abner. "He was bound and left in a place where poisonous snakes or wild animals might come for shelter."

"As I said."

Abner ignored the interruption. "The boy did set foot on this property—as far as the fairy ring. But he was not taken by any fairies. This woman, who was born a Campbell, pointed out the answer when I first arrived. 'Must have been snatched up' she said. And he was. He did not take wings to leave that ring. He was snatched up and carried from it. Carried to the ledge where he was found."

He looked across at Storm. "Earlier, you told me who sent for Fisher and his dog to make this search. Who was it?"

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"She did," the old doctor said, nodding toward Flora MacGregor.

"Of course," she cried. "I wanted him found!"

"No," said Abner, "you did not want him found. Not yet. You wanted it to appear that Kate Donovan took him away, by magic or some other means. You did not want him found until it was much too late."

"You are mad!" she screamed. "Why would I do such a thing? She's a Campbell. They are sworn to kill me and mine!"

You might have said that no man's beard could bristle in such heat, but I could swear that my uncle's did.

"There are two sides to a feud," he said. "We have only your word that the Campbells are seeking you. It is more likely that you tried to sacrifice a child to destroy this woman. You wanted to put blame on her, even to bring about her execution."

"My own child?" she cried.

"Why did he keep crying to me as I carried him that he had been left for the bears to eat? That 'she' told him so? Why is he in terror of you now?"

"She has turned his mind against me! She put him there, not I!"

Abner held up the shoes. "The dog was not influenced by her shoe. He took the scent of yours and led us to that ledge."

Randolph spoke up. "But, still, Abner—her own child?"

Abner looked again at the old doctor. "Tell him, Storm."

Storm drew himself up. "I told Abner that I thought the boy might be an orphan. I have examined her, never mind why. She has never borne a child. She has never known a man."

"An orphan," said Randolph, amazed.

Thunder rumbled not too far away.

"Perhaps," said Abner. "Perhaps abducted from the Campbells as an act of vengeance."

The room was lit by a lightning flash. I heard the first patter of rain on the dry ground.

Flora MacGregor shook her head so violently that a long strand of red hair slipped across her face. She ignored it.

"She has bewitched all of you!" she screamed. She looked once more at Kate Donovan. "Very well. Keep him then. It will be a nest of Campbells. A nest of snakes!"

She burst from the room and out the front door just as the edge of a curtain of rain advanced up the road. Still shrieking, she ran to the shelter of the big elm in the side yard. She had scarcely reached it when the sky glared like the noonday sun, there was a

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rending as though the very hills had split, and a vast rumble shook us to the bone.

I looked from the window. At the foot of another large tree I had once seen ten cows take shelter in a storm. When a lightning bolt had struck the tree, all ten had died. Under the elm, a lone woman had fared no better.

Speechless, we stared at the stretched-out figure.

Finally Kate Donovan turned to Randolph. "The boy—she gave him to me, even though she might not have had the right. I have never had children. I could try."

He sighed. "It would be a solution. I think none of us would object."

She looked out again. "Poor creature. She never realized that I was a Campbell of Ireland, not Scotland."

"I knew you were," said Uncle Abner.

DETECTIVERSE

X MARKS THE UNKNOWN SPOT

by VIRGIL STRIEBY

One *EQMM* mystery I hate
(I'm willing to face it)
Is not the puzzle "Whodunit?"
But "Where-did-I-place-it?"

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a *NEW* short story by

DAN J. MARLOWE

When Kitty Monahan, twenty and good-looking, visited her father Charley in the maximum-security federal prison, he always asked, "What's goin' on outside?" Well, what was going on outside was exactly why the Treasury Department considered Charley Monahan a public menace . . .

THE GIRL WHO SOLD MONEY

by DAN J. MARLOWE

Kitty Monahan left her compact car in the visitors' parking lot at the federal prison. She was 20, a nice-looking girl with dark red hair piled atop her head. She was dressed casually in a tank top and walking shorts.

"Afternoon, Miss Monahan," the guard said as Kitty entered the administration lobby and approached the admissions desk. The guard smiled at her as he went through his file and pulled out the card for Kitty's father, Charley Monahan.

"I'd like to leave fifty dollars for him," Kitty said. She placed it on the desk. She accepted her receipt, signed the prison register, and moved into the line of visitors who were awaiting the opening of the remote-control sliding gate which led to the metal-detection unit through which all must enter. Beyond it another electronically operated gate had to be passed through to reach the visiting room.

Charley Monahan had not yet arrived from within the prison. Kitty selected a chair at a small table away from the guard's desk. Charley valued his privacy, even when it consisted solely of constantly aborted escape plans hatched by fellow incompetents who couldn't have escaped from their own basements if they were locked in.

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"H'ya, girl," a rasping voice said from behind Kitty.

"Hi, Charley," she said, standing up and turning around. She had always called her father Charley. He was so seldom around, for one thing, that Dad or Pa or Pop had never seemed to sound right.

Charley folded his daughter in his arms briefly and gave her cheek a quick peck. He was a bantam of a man who stood no taller than Kitty's five-six and weighed no more than her healthy 120. Charley was, as usual, hyperactively red-faced. Sprigs of sparse white hair adorned his otherwise bald head.

He seated himself across the table from Kitty. "How's it goin'?" he asked, as he always did. He spoke in the prison monotone inaudible five feet away.

"Fine," Kitty said, as she always did.

"Still workin' at the same place?"

What had she told him about the last place where she was supposed to have been working? Was that the job where she was a clerk in the office of a plumbing contractor?

"The mail room of the book publisher?" Charley prompted.

"No, I've changed." She told him about the supposed clerical job in the office of the plumbing contractor. Maybe she could remember that on her next visit.

"How's it with you?" she went on in the familiar ritual.

"Three of us are goin' over the wall next month, girl." Kitty nodded placidly. Three or four or five or six of them were always going over the wall next month. They never went. They never would. They were in a maximum-security federal prison. Charley was there not because of his track record for escapes but because the Treasury Department considered him a public menace.

"You still livin' in the same apartment?" her father went on. "We might need you to drive the getaway car. I'll get word to you in time."

Kitty smiled at him fondly. Her mother had eased herself away from the Monahan scene when Kitty was six. Charley had raised her, after his fashion. During his prison sojourns he boarded her out, but from the age of nine she often kept house for herself for years at a time with no supervision. Men with Irish faces knocked on the apartment door monthly and silently handed her rent and food money.

Schooling had been a sometime thing. She had never cared for it, anyway. She lived for the times when Charley was home and the kitchen table was surrounded by seedy cronies and cluttered with

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bottles of ale and foul-smelling pipes. She had listened to dozens of plans for diddling the no-good, damn-fool government, knowing even at a schoolgirl's age that the plans wouldn't work. But occasionally they did, for a while, and then life was exciting.

"What's goin' on outside?" Charley asked.

She knew he was asking about what was going on in the world of counterfeiting. Through the long years Charley had become a superb technician in the manufacture of paper and in the creation of plates for the reproduction of U.S. Treasury notes. It was why the Treasury Department insisted on overseeing Charley's living arrangements.

"Not much of anything, really," Kitty said.

"Bunch of pipsqueakin' parsnip peelers!" Charley snorted. "We'll show 'em the next time, won't we?"

Kitty nodded patiently. Charley's counterfeit would pass anywhere, even among people who handled money all the time. Where Charley's schemes invariably broke down was that he always surrounded himself with friends, semi-vagrants, who were supposed to pass the roomful of counterfeit that Charley had run off on his plates. The first friend caught led the Treasury men direct to Charley.

Increasingly, Kitty had counseled moderation. Run off no more than $100,000, then pass it themselves, she urged Charley. No more than could be placed in a cigar box. But Charley would have none of it. He radiated power when his press was running. He seemed to grow six inches when he was printing from his plates. "I'll bust this damned government!" he would vow, hair standing up all over his head.

Their conversation had reminded him of something. "What did you do with that wallpaper you had me run off for you the last time?" he asked.

"A lot of it is still at the apartment," Kitty said truthfully.

"Waste of good ink," her father said gruffly. "What you ever thought you were gonna do with stuff lookin' like that—"

Kitty asked if there was anything he needed. There never was. Charley had stopped smoking when he discovered that dropped cigarette ash was marring the pristine purity of his plates. She wondered if he would ever mellow sufficiently to listen to her. A demon possessed him when he was printing. Nothing could halt his filling up boxes, cartons, and trunks with beautifully crisp 50s and 100s. He always printed so much it had to be sold in bulk at five and ten

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cents on the dollar, but the next time he would do it all over again.

She caught him sneaking a look at the wall clock, and she rose to her feet. A thirty-minute visit once a month was all Charley's hyperkinetic nature could stand. The rest of his prison time was spent on impotent escape plans and imaginatively conceived improved counterfeiting processes. "Take care, Charley," she said.

"You, too," he responded, rising to give her another peck. "Oh, yeah, how do I stand with the parole board?" He never bothered to keep track himself.

"Your last set-off date expires in eighteen months," Kitty said. "I think you might make it then."

"Hell, I could do eighteen months on a picket fence," her parent informed her. "Nice to see you again, girl."

The eternal child, she thought to herself as she backtracked through the security system and returned to her car. The unharnessed idiot savant. Unharnessed. That was the word to remember.

She drove the 150 miles to her apartment, checking her watch as she entered. There was time to get in a couple of hours' work. She took from her closet the pants suit she considered sincere-looking, and put it on over her tank top and shorts. It was hot during the day, but it was her working uniform.

She let down her dark red hair, parted it in the middle, then let its fullness drape artlessly over her shoulders. She removed her makeup and left her nose-freckles exposed. It was a different-looking Kitty who went out to her car and drove into town.

She parked half a block from a singles' nightclub called "The Insecurity City." She walked down three steps out of the sunlight on the hot sidewalk into the sunken entrance. The place was dimly lit, and she waited until her eyes adjusted to the gloom. The décor was late-1890's brothel—large gilt-edged mirrors, red plush, green velvet.

She went to the long mahogany bar and sat down on a stool in front of the cash register. "The Insecurity City" was one of a half-dozen places she had checked out the night before. She needed places busy during the evenings, with bartenders who had made good tips the night before and knew they would again tonight.

Now the place was semi-deserted. There were no customers at the tables. There were only two drinkers at the bar—a woman on Kitty's left, staring down into her drink, and at the far end of the bar a solitary male in a tropical, sharpie-looking suit and a facial expression that to Kitty's eye proclaimed self-satisfaction.

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The bartender came down the duckboards and stopped in front of Kitty. He looked big enough to do his own bouncing. He rested his weight on his splayed knuckles on the bar top while he smiled at Kitty. The frontal expanse of his shirt front seemed to absorb all the light in the place.

"Hi," she said cheerfully. "I'm Kitty."

"Victor."

"Hi, Victor. I'd like the coldest beer you have in the house. It's terribly hot outside when you're hustling."

Victor placed a bottle of beer and a frosted glass on the bar. "Hustling?" he repeated. He half filled the glass.

Kitty held her breath momentarily, and a tide of color bloomed on her cheeks. "Not that kind of hustling! I sell. Cosmetics." She pretended indignation. "Do I look like a street hustler?"

Victor's world-weary dark eyes had been examining her. "No," he decided. "I think maybe you didn't come out've no candy store, Kitty, but a hustler you're not."

She almost choked on her first sip of beer. Was this big clown too with-it to go for the tale? "Gee, thanks a bunch!" she said in a protesting tone. She opened her handbag to pay for the beer.

"On the house," Victor informed her. "Because you're the best-lookin' thing walked in here today." He leaned over the bar, still studying her. "You're really peddlin' downtown?"

"They're breaking me in," Kitty explained. "My supervisor says if I survive all the doors slammed in my face—wood, aluminum, screen, storm, whatever—without hysterics, then I'll get a car and a route of my own in the suburbs." She picked up her glass again. "Thanks for the beer. After the day I've had, it really hits the spot."

Victor nodded. "No sales?"

Kitty smiled wryly. "Worse than that." She reached for her handbag again. "Look what the last customer handed me." She took her purse from her bag, opened it, and removed a new-looking, crisp-sounding bill. "I mean I really learned something today. The customer made her selection and stood there with money in her hand, a twenty on top. I made change for a twenty, but when I got outside I found out she'd pulled back the twenty and given me this." She handed the bill to Victor.

The big man slapped his shirt pocket for the glasses that weren't there. "A five? A one?" he asked as he turned toward the cash register.

"Take a look."

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He picked up his glasses from the back bar and moved closer to the goose-necked lamp arched over the cash register. "Say, now!" he exclaimed. "An' here I thought I'd seen everything in the world twice." He snapped the bill between his hands. It crackled loudly. "Damn, that sounds like the McCoy!" He was shaking his head when he turned around to Kitty. "Tough luck, kid," he sympathized. "You got taken by a pro."

He placed the bill down on the bar top in front of Kitty. As if drawn by magnets, their heads came together above it. The bill looked ordinary except for the numbers indicating its denomination. It wasn't a 1 or a 2 or a 5 or a 10 or a 20 or a 50 or a 100. The numbers on the corners of the bill said 17. One seven. S-E-V-E-N-T-E-E-N dollars!

Victor picked up the bill again. He was frowning. "I don't get it," he declared. "That's the best-*feelin'* green goods I ever held in my hand. An' look at it. Perfect color, perfect printin', sharp points on the seal—everything perfect but what it calls for. What idiot would take the trouble to make a perfect bill, fibered paper an' all, an' then print seventeen dollars on it?"

"Someone who wanted to show me how stupid I am," she said.

"Naah, don't feel bad. That scam'd grab anyone till they saw it once." He turned the bill front to back, peering at it. "Perfect," he said. "An' believe me, I get to see a lot of real toilet paper. Say, how's about I give you a five spot for this? As a curiosity?"

"I'm hoping my supervisor will give me my money back when I tell her what happened," Kitty said.

"Hey, girl, you're a dreamer. Take my five an' cut your loss."

"I don't think so, Victor."

"C'mon," he coaxed. "Sell it to me. For ten? I want to include it in my deposit tomorrow. You know, listed separately, one seventeen-dollar bill. It'll make my day watchin' the looks on the frozen-pussed clerks at the bank." He waved the bill at her. "Whaddya say? A sawbuck, okay?"

"Well—" Kitty hesitated.

"Great." Victor pulled a roll of bills from his pocket, peeled off a ten, and handed it to Kitty. The seventeen-dollar bill he placed carefully in his wallet. "Wouldn't want it to contaminate the bills in the register," he said with a wink. Four men entered the bar and seated themselves at a table. "No waitress this early. Be right back."

Kitty waited until he was taking the order at the table, then left her nearly full glass of beer on the bar as she stepped down from

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her stool. She was conscious that the sharpie-suited man at the end of the bar was watching her as she moved toward the exit. "Be right back," she echoed Victor as she passed him.

Out on the street she walked a block to the next bar she had scouted the night before. Its name was "The Steel Mill." Its décor was strictly blue collar. The aproned man behind the bar was younger than Victor. Again the place was almost empty, essential so the bartender would have time to listen to her tale.

Kitty seated herself on a bar stool. "Hi," she said cheerfully. "I'm Kitty."

"Eddie," the bartender said. "What'll it be?"

"The coldest glass of beer you have in the house."

It had taken her twelve minutes to run through the tale with Victor.

It took her only eight minutes with Eddie.

When the bartender put the seventeen-dollar bill in his wallet and walked away in response to a plea from a thirsty customer, Kitty again left her almost untouched beer and headed for the exit. "Be right back," she called to Eddie. He waved.

A hand gripped Kitty's arm just inside the entrance. She swung around to confront the sharpie-suited individual from "The Insecurity City" who had obviously followed her. "Hands off the body," she said tersely.

The man released her arm. "Quayle, U.S. Treasury," he said. "We heard about the stuff some of these bartenders are comin' up with. Let's see what kind of queer you're pushing."

He reached tentatively for Kitty's handbag. When she made no objection, he rummaged through it. "What's your name?" he demanded.

"You have my driver's license there," Kitty said.

The driver's license said Angela Quisenberry.

Charley hadn't understood why she had had him make that up for her, either.

Quayle's right hand emerged triumphantly from Kitty's bag with a silver money clip holding twelve $17 bills. "Where'd you get this counterfeit?"

"What counterfeit, Mr. Quayle? Exactly what do you think is being counterfeited?"

He waved the clip at her. "U.S. currency, young lady."

"Counterfeit is an imitation of an original, right?" Kitty continued on before Quayle could speak, at the same time taking her bag back

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from him. "Show me the original of the U.S. currency you're claiming I counterfeited." Quayle looked down at the money clip in his hand, suddenly uncertain. "What you have there, Mr. Quayle, is a novelty item."

The agent shook his head stubbornly. "The fibered paper—" he began, but then he looked at the bills' denomination again. "Listen, you stand right here while I make a phone call," he ordered. "But I'll tell you right now we're taking a trip downtown."

There was a pay phone just inside the entrance. After Quayle had dialed, Kitty tapped him on the shoulder. When he turned, she pointed to the door of the ladies' room which was visible from the entrance. Quayle nodded, shifting his position slightly so he could keep the door of the ladies' room in view.

The ladies' room was empty when Kitty entered it. She quickly removed her pants suit, then swept her hair up atop her head, and knotted it loosely. She rolled up the pants suit and tucked it under her arm.

Quayle's voice sounded irritated when Kitty emerged from the ladies' room in her tank top and shorts. He glanced at her as she walked past him, then returned to his argument without taking a second look at her.

She walked down the block to where she had left her car.

The Angela Quisenberry driver's license was a hedge against Charley Monahan's daughter being interrogated about counterfeit.

She wondered how long Quayle would wait before he entered the ladies' room looking for a pants-suited redhead with long hair.

Charley was going to love it when she explained this to him.

They could work it together.

No one was holding a gun at the heads of the bartenders, hotel clerks, insurance agents, and all the other males who bought Kitty's novelty item.

She and Charley could live comfortably, working only a couple of hours a day, and it would all be legal—absolutely legal.

And they could bring eternal confusion to all the nosy U.S. Treasury agents asking the inevitable nosy questions about counterfeit U.S. currency.

Yes, Charley was going to love it.

"Q"

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Red Salter, the jive musician-detective, flies again! . . .

IT'S A LONG FLIGHT TO L.A.

by JOHN STORM ROBERTS

I spotted the freaky little guy with the guitar case at Kennedy Airport while I was buying a chocolate bar to tuck in my shirt pocket for emergencies, but I didn't think anything of him. There's a kook on every flight. On the plane I was across the aisle from him, which was too near, being I had some last-minute arrangements to work on before the Los Angeles recording session. There's no way you can be fooling with music around a cat with an instrument without getting comment, and I don't groove on random encounters with musicians. Especially seedy kids with guitars. Either they want you to audition them in the first five minutes, or they spend an hour bitching about commercialism and *then* want you to audition them.

Still, better too near him than too near Rick Randall, who showed up just before takeoff. Five hours in a jumbo jet gives me a pain in the butt without Rick as a bonus. Bad enough I'd once played piano behind him for a couple of weeks.

That was when he'd just made "Dead Man's Heart," and was BIG, MAN! Our Rick wasn't the kind of guy to notice relief pianists when he was BIG, MAN!, but things had changed since then. I can't say Red Salter is BIG, MAN!—but I'd had some fair ink behind my last album. Rick being en route to his third comeback in six years—he hoped—was liable to remember anybody who might be useful, and I don't need supper-club balladeers being affable at me. Not that Rick was in too affable shape. He was sitting next to one of those blondes that aging entertainers like to flaunt in public, eating his manicure.

I still dig flying, especially on a fine day with the sun coming in the windows and the fat old clouds stacked up below you so thick you could almost bounce on 'em. I belted up, fantasized briefly about an Oriental stewardess and a foxy lady in a seat a couple rows ahead, passed up the headphones, afforded myself a Chivas Regal

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in honor of good times to come, ate me a harmless enough meal, and settled down to dream up something sexy for the backup singers on what might or might not become the disco single.

I'd about got them stomping into the rideout on a real oldtime 1940's close-harmony groove when the cat with the guitar across the aisle flagged down the Oriental stewardess. He was looking real nervous.

She leaned over him and smiled a glorious Rising Sun smile, and he looked up at her and sweated and gave her a long rap, and I watched the Rising Sun smile slowly sink back into the sea, and thought to myself, "oh-*oh*."

I'd never been hijacked before, and I don't want to be hijacked again. Not that anything melodramatic happened. Rising Sun went up front looking solemn, but pretty cool at that, and Guitar waited with his instrument in its case on the seat beside him and one hand inside the airline bag on his knees, blinking the sweat out of his eyes. The mom in front of me tried unsuccessfully to make her icky kid quit kicking its nasty little legs about, and the sun kept right on streaming through the windows. I glanced back down at my charts, but close-harmony rideouts had lost their appeal. So I gave up on them and listened to the space in my middle where my belly used to live.

After maybe ten minutes during which I got to feeling nauseous and Guitar mopped at himself with a dirty handkerchief, the heavens spoke.

"This is your pilot, Captain Jim Morrison. Sorry to interrupt your listening, but we have an alteration in our previously announced schedule owing to a slight case of hijacking. As you know, every such incident you've read about has been resolved satisfactorily, but you'll probably experience some delay in arriving at your destination. Meanwhile, the people involved have instructed that you all move into the middle cabin. The stewardesses will help you find new seats."

There weren't many passengers but it still took a while because they moved us row by row. I hung back a little, and got myself into a side aisle seat near the back of the cabin, a row or two behind Rick Randall and his blonde, and three rows in front of Guitar, who shifted himself into the back of the cabin, where he could keep an eye on us without anybody having a chance to sneak up behind him.

I gave a silent bow to Captain Jim Morrison. His tone suggested that well, folks, we have a problem but at least it ain't as bad as fog

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over the airport. Still and all, he went over big. There was a fair amount of squawking and staring round, and when Rising Sun came back and spoke to Guitar everybody nearby leaned over and craned their necks and drank him in while he sat avoiding eyes and kept on sweating. I glanced over at Rick Randall and saw that he was sweating too, gripping the arms of his seat and mumbling to himself. It figured. He always was a hysterical type.

For a while everything was cool enough. The stewardesses did a land-office business with the booze trolley, and the loudspeaker played nothing-music, and we buzzed along 30,000 feet over Pennsylvania or wherever, and the sun shone in like nothing was happening.

Which was about the case, as far as we were concerned. I had no doubt messages were bouncing back and forth between the cockpit and the ground, and neat quiet men were putting in calls and feeding tape into computers, looking for Guitar's real name, background, criminal record, aunts and uncles and tastes and motivations, and up front in L.A. cats with badges were clicking into Plan A, just the way they did it last time and the time before and the time before that. On planning and hope and a wing and a prayer. Because last time wasn't Guitar, and they couldn't know what Guitar wanted and what he'd settle for, and what screws would fall out of his ears when he shook his head.

It's a long flight to L.A. when there's no movie and you don't dare look round at the sweaty guy behind you with one hand in his airline bag. After Captain Morrison had made his announcement and everybody had checked out Guitar, there was an outburst of chatter, but that died down after a while and the plane got very quiet: a hundred some passengers, 12 crew, and not a word out of any of 'em, while Flight 770 hummed over Ohio.

Then Randall's blonde got hysterics. First she babbled thirteen to the dozen, and then she started to cry. Not silently, either.

Hysteria's something stewardesses know all about. Randall had hardly stopped quivering from her first shriek and put his arm round her when Rising Sun was standing next to her with a couple of round things in one hand and a glass of water in the other. She and Randall got the pills into the blonde, and slowly she quit squawking and simmered down till she was just sobbing off and on.

But by then she'd had her effect. First, some kid up front began crying, and next, the little girl in front of me quit asking her mommy dumb questions and started to bawl, and all in all it began to look

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like we were heading for a breakdown in morale. The stewardesses did their best with their little tablets and their big smiles, but the bad vibes were twanging in the air. The flight had another three hours to go, and they promised to be 180 sticky minutes.

That was when Rick Randall made his move. Remember that business a while back when Theodore Bikel entertained the people on some hijacked plane or other? Our Rick apparently did. He suddenly came out of the tight-lipped coma he'd gone into when his blonde finally quit emoting, called Rising Sun over, and muttered in her ear.

Rising Sun shot a quick glance at Rick, and another quick glance at Guitar, and shook her head as she answered. But Rick insisted, and finally she went up front while Randall gnawed on his lips. About five minutes later she came back, nodded slightly at Randall, and went over to Guitar.

More conversation, Guitar shaking his head, Rising Sun gently insisting. Finally Guitar shrugged. Moving slow and cautious, Rising Sun picked up his guitar case from the seat beside him and took it out into the middle of the aisle. There she opened it up and took out his instrument. It was a pretty fair ax at that, an old Martin that must have cost three bills minimum.

At that point Captain Jim Morrison came back on the air.

"Hello again," he said in a voice like an Elk's handshake. "We have things squared away so that this matter can be resolved to suit everybody once we get to Los Angeles. But that's a way ahead, and meanwhile we have good news. I'm sure you all know Rick Randall, the famous entertainer. Well, I'm happy to say we have him on board with us, and he's offered to entertain us in flight."

So Ole Rick shifted himself up to the front of the cabin, tuned up the Martin, and started out. He sang requests, and he sang standards, but mostly he sang his own material. The only thing he didn't sing was "Dead Man's Heart." Before long he had a regular supper-club routine going, complete with patter and jokes and plenty of little plugs for his new album and his L.A. comeback.

Amazing. Before you knew it, those hundred frightened passengers were an Audience. A boffo audience at that, as they used to say in Rick's young days. What with the stewardesses serving champagne on the house, it was like opening night at the Copa.

In fact, it seemed like the only people who weren't partying was Guitar and me. Guitar was sitting five feet back from me with his hand in his airline bag, still sweating, and I was thinking. Thinking

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about airport security, and about what people will do to keep from going under. And the more I thought, the more sense I made.

After a while I buzzed for Rising Sun.

"I'd like to talk to the dude back there," I said to her. "I want you to come along."

She wrinkled her sensational forehead at me.

"That's impossible."

"How come? You ain't doin' nothing."

"Impossible for you to talk to him. It's too dangerous."

"Why? What's his pitch?"

She looked discreet.

"Okay," I said. "The captain told you not to gossip. But he didn't tell me not to go talk to that cat."

Before she could react I stood up, walked back to where Guitar was sitting, and dropped into the seat next to him.

"Hey, man," I said. "Wha's 'appnin'?"

The guy didn't have an answer to that. Or maybe he did, but I didn't take the time to find out.

"You a musician, hey?" I nodded at his ax. "Me too. Red Salter."

Guitar opened his mouth, but I kept on babbling.

"Quite a guy, our Rick, hunh? I mean, I couldn't get up and do my thing with you sittin' there with whatever you got in your bag. Could you?"

Guitar was still sweating, but I felt just a little of his tension ease. He had me docketed! An idiot. I glanced across at Rising Sun, who had slipped quietly into a seat across the aisle. Her face said she obviously agreed with him. I turned back to my man.

"Funny thing, I worked for Rick once, and he never struck me as a hero type. Card-carrying coward, I'd have said. Just goes to show, hunh?"

Up front, Rick was singing *If I Had a Hammer*, and a respectable chunk of his audience was singing along. If Rick had a hammer, he'd drop it on his foot, but they didn't care.

"You know what," I said to Guitar. "That's the first time he's had a really good audience in, oh, six years. Ironic, hunh? I mean with you mebbe going to blow us all up or whatever—"

Guitar was getting almost as mad as he was nervous. Hard-working hijacker doesn't like to have his thunder stolen.

"Take a walk," he said. I didn't.

"You know, you're really giving him quite a break! I mean, the guy's opening in L.A. tomorrow night. What publicity, eh?" I nodded

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up front. Rick was glancing over toward Guitar, looking edgy, as well he might. When he saw me looking at him he glanced away and beamed at the many-headed.

"Okay, folks, anything special you'd like to hear?"

I waved my arm in the air.

"Yeah, Rick," I called, "*Where There's a Will There's a Way.*"

Rick gave me a nasty look.

"You got me," he called back, all cheer.

Just then his blonde piped up. "How about, *Send in the Clowns?*"

Rick Randall singing *Send in the Clowns* was something I definitely didn't need. Only one singer in a thousand has the taste not to hoke it up, and that one ain't Rick. I turned back to Guitar.

"Yeah," I said. "Rick owes you something. He's going to find himself all over the paper tomorrow, I reckon. If he makes it."

Guitar licked his lips. I could feel the armrest between us shaking slightly. I grinned at him.

"But I guess he'll make it. I mean, there's more than twenty-four hours till opening. That gives you plenty time to do your thing. And you could always release him early, right? Except that wouldn't be too cool."

For the first time Guitar glanced at me.

"Why not?"

I looked surprised. "Why, the man's your ace in the hole. You don't throw your ace away. What're you after, anyway?"

"Get away from me," Guitar said. "I'm warning you. Get the hell away."

The armrest picked up speed and he jerked his hand inside the airline bag. Across the aisle Rising Sun drew in her breath with a little hiss.

"No, seriously," I said. "You after money? I can dig it. Ain't many gigs for acoustic guitarists these days, not unless they're Segovia or something."

There's one sure way to nick a musician. Go for the ego.

"I played Folk City last month!" he said.

"Yeah, that's what I mean. Can't get a job for weeks, and when you do it's a no-dough showcase gig, hunh? You *have* to be hungry, man! Here—"

Without giving him time to react, I reached for the bar of chocolate sticking out of my shirt pocket. His right hand stayed in the airline bag, but he automatically took his left one off the handle. As he did so, I smiled at him.

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"You sure taking a risk, fella. Who thought up this thing, anyway? You? Or Rick Randall?"

He froze, his left hand curved round the candy bar. I watched him turn gray, and shook my head sympathetically.

"Rick, I guess. He always did have a second-hand mind. Guess he remembered the Bikel hijacking and decided to hire him a stooge and make a rerun. You have to admit, it's a great promotion gimmick. What did he offer you? Best lawyer in town and steady backup job when you get out? Lifetime contract? He sure suckered you, fella. Heavy felony, hijacking!"

Before Guitar could come out of shock, I let go of the candy bar, dropped both my hands onto the handle of his airline bag, and jerked it away from him. I could tell by the weight there was nothing more lethal in it than dirty socks.

"Here, honey!" I handed it across the aisle to Rising Sun and turned back to Guitar. As he started to shake, I patted him on the knee.

"Don't be upset," I said. "Backing Rick's a jail term in itself. Take it from one who knows!"

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

CRIME INDEX: John Nieminski must be among the most patient and meticulous men ever to sharpen a pencil. Some years ago he compiled a complete index to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* which at that time (January 1973) had published 350 issues. Now he has done it again, this time for *The Saint Mystery Magazine* (as well as its publication as *The Saint Detective Magazine* and *The Saint Magazine).* He has followed the format of his initial effort, providing the essential author and title indexes, supplemented with such valuable data as series characters, Sherlockiana, title changes, and so forth. The magazine appeared 141 times between Spring 1953 and October 1967, and this invaluable booklet should provide everything you would need to know.

This index is stated to be the first in a series by the publisher, with plans to index *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* on the drawing board. Copies may be ordered directly from the publisher, Cook & McDowell Publications, 3318 Wimberg Avenue, Evansville, IL 47712. Price is $6.75. Copies of *EQMM 350,* the index to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* may still be available from the publisher, Allen J. Hubin, 3656 Midland Avenue, White Bear Lake, MN 55110, at the published price of $4.50. Another important index currently available is *The Armchair Detective Index,* compiled by Steven A. Stilwell, covering the first ten years of the Edgar-winning journal. The price is $7.50 from The Armchair Detective, 129 West 56th Street, New York, NY 10019.

CRIME JUBILEE: The venerable English publishing house, Collins, is preparing to celebrate its "Fifty Golden Years of Crime, 1930–1980" as its famous Crime Club imprint enjoys its golden anniversary. Although already one of the leading publishers of mystery fiction in Great Britain at the time (Agatha Christie and Freeman Wills Crofts were two of its authors), Collins decided to emphasize a portion of its list and created the Crime Club imprint on May 6, 1930, with the publication of Philip MacDonald's *The Noose.* Like Doubleday's Crime Club in the United States, the name is intended solely to make readers aware of the type of book being published; it is not a

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book club. To help commemorate the occasion, Collins' Crime Club is reissuing twelve classics from its list, each selected and introduced by Julian Symons, and specially bound with a gold dust jacket. The big problem is how to get these excellent editions of novels by Nicholas Blake, C. Daly King, MacDonald, Christie, Crofts, and others, since the books are not sold in the U.S.

Good luck.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Although the repeatedly descending knife never actually penetrates Janet Leigh in *Psycho's* infamous shower sequence, the 1960 Alfred Hitchcock thriller was a landmark: it pioneered the explicit horror film. And while some of the resulting shockers were merely exercises in the supernatural, enough films—though crude—are psychological mysteries and even whodunits that their bloody visions are of interest.

Cautiously at first, some of the better craftsmen in our field attempted to bring their skills to this market. Some succeeded: Robert Bloch followed *Psycho* with such twisty chillers as *The Couch* (about a maniac and his psychiatrist) and *Straight-Jacket*—a very winning puzzle featuring Joan Crawford as an axe-murderer. The latter was brought to the screen by William Castle, whose entire career as a director-producer—beginning with Columbia's *The Whistler* series—is a catalogue of mystery-horrors, including the very underrated *Homicidal* and triumphing with *Rosemary's Baby*. Francis Ford Coppola contributed *Dementia 13*, an almost Gothic tale of strange murders near an Irish castle. Robert Aldrich made several ventures into the form, the first and best of which was the moody *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (The London ad campaign answered that question playfully: *She grue some.*) Director Curtis Harrington has also contributed eerie pieces.

The Italians—who read more mysteries than any other European country—have taken to the genre as well, led by director emeritus Mario Bava, who uses colors like other mystery craftsmen use shadows (see *Fashion House of Death*). Currently, Europe's outstanding thriller director is Italy's Dario Argento, especially for his first film, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, and the aptly titled *Deep Red*, both intelligent whodunits as well as tales of heart-pounding suspense. And occasionally it is gratifying to receive from Rome such crime dramas as the unusual *Autopsy*—about murders in the Medical Examiner's office solved by a young priest and a troubled heiress.

Most mystery shockers, however, are earmarked for the drive-in trade:

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generally endless psychopathic terror. Happily, some of even this lot rise above the mucky bottom. George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* and small-budget vampire film, *Martin,* are now part of university courses. Tobe Hooper's first film, the raw *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which is based on the same real-life case as was *Psycho,* only approached differently, had beyond its unnerving punch a rough vitality which marked him as a director to watch; Tobe recently proved his worth when he helmed the shattering, Edgar-nominated television two-parter of the Stephen King book, *Salem's Lot.* Much more sensitive, yet with the same shock-capability is Brian De Palma, particularly with *Carrie* and *The Fury*—in which characters find within themselves kinetic powers to unfurl terrible vengeance.

Two recent films continue the vogue of horror mystery. *Silent Scream* ("Terror so sudden you will not be able to scream!" cry the ads) starts well enough. Four young college students must seek off-campus housing. They find it in a gloomy old Victorian mansion on a cliff high above the Pacific (the setting is California). When one student is found murdered on the beach, investigating homicide detectives recall that, years before, a daughter of the family living in the house spent some time in a mental hospital and then disappeared. What happens from that point on is fairly guessable, and the ending is a total letdown; however, there are a few individual moments which carry genuine chills. As when the probing camera takes the audience on a silent journey through the secret inner recesses of the house, up a crumbling, cobwebby hidden staircase between the walls, stopping at a rotting barrier behind which a fluttery shape—barely perceived through the cracks—is frenziedly scratching and breathing hard.

Friday the 13th (produced and directed by Sean Cunningham, who similarly did the phenomenally successful *Last House on the Left*), takes place on a single June day and night at the newly reopened Camp Crystal Lake in the Adirondacks. A decade before, two youngsters had been found dead there—which closed the place down—but this does not faze the six nice young counselors who have been hired to begin the general repair of the facility. One by one the six are struck down—but at the end of the horror is a reasonably constructed whydunit. Cunningham claims it is a story whose villain could be the person next door, and "psychologically, the awareness that 'this could happen to me' is an extremely effective method of scaring the wits out of an audience." It is, and he does. Less slaughter and more subtlety would be better, though, as the search for the perfect horror-mystery film continues.

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"Q"

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INTERVIEW: PETER LOVESEY

The unusual detective novels of Peter Lovesey are set in Victorian England and draw on background material that is both unusual and fascinating. His series characters, Sergeant Cribb and Constable Thackeray, are featured in the PBS television series, *Mystery!*

EQMM: Where did you acquire the detailed background in such esoteric subjects for your books—for the first one, for example, *Wobble to Death,* in which six-day racing plays so great a role?

LOVESEY: As a young man, I would have liked to have been an outstanding sportsman, but the best I ever achieved was fourth in the high jump—and that was after training for a whole season, making great dents in my father's lawn. Since I was just no good at it at all, I began to look for an area of sport that I could write about, and track and field athletics took my interest particularly. But I soon saw that I wasn't going to be able to make my way as a journalist, since famous athletes or experienced writers were wanted, and I was neither of those. Then I began to look for something that hadn't been covered at all and eventually wrote a book about five great distance runners who competed at intervals of twenty years. It had some lovely reviews, sold about 2,000 copies in England, and I assumed that was the end of it.

Then, the following year, 1969, we saw an advertisement in *The Times* offering a thousand pounds in a competition for best first crime novel. My wife, Jackie, devoured detective fiction at the rate of three or four per week (I had read little besides Sherlock Holmes) and asked why didn't I try to win the competition. I thought about the curious long-distance competitions in which men would either walk or run around a small track for six days on end. It was simply an endurance contest but there was a great deal of interest and betting, as well as chicanery. I had never seen a book coming out of it until it occurred to me that a fictional treatment might work. So I asked Jackie, "What about this? Do you think you could dream up a plot for me to use?" She said, "Why not? It's little different from the country house setup in the classic detective story."

EQMM: Despite the huge arena, all the characters are in full view.

LOVESEY: You might as well have the snow outside the country mansion.

EQMM: Once you found you could write a detective novel in that era, you stayed with it.

LOVESEY: Being a cautious sort of bloke, I decided that my second book should be in the same period and also with a sports background, this time bare-knuckle fighting for *The Detective Wore Silk Drawers.* Then I took subjects that were in great vogue during Victorian times and invented plots that seemed to fit the background, like music halls in *Abracadaver,* the seaside in *Mad Hatter's Holiday,* a wax museum in *Waxwork.* The one that is different is *The Tick of Death,* an attempt to write more of a thriller and give Sergeant Cribb a new role. I quite con-

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sciously analyzed Ian Fleming's books and drew numerous parallels from *Goldfinger*. I thought it would be amusing to write a Victorian James Bond.

EQMM: What are you working on now?

LOVESEY: Jackie and I are working together on six new television scripts, original scripts (not adaptations) with Cribb and Jowett and Thackeray as the main characters.

EQMM: What about books?

LOVESEY: Coming in the fall will be the sequel to *Golden Girl,* which I wrote under the pseudonym Peter Lear. The new one's called *Spidergirl.*

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

The authors of the first two of this month's new novels both belong to a club that is undeniably exclusive but grows by a member or two each month. Their membership numbers are 348 and 399 respectively, and regular readers of *EQMM* should have no trouble guessing what club I'm talking about.

*** Richard Laymon: *The Cellar,* Warner Books, $2.25. In a well written horror novel revolving around a grisly tourist attraction on the Northern California coast called Beast House, Laymon displays the knack of grabbing the reader and keeping the pages flying. The characters are effectively drawn, with a mother-teenage daughter relationship especially nicely handled.

*** Gerald Tomlinson: *On a Field of Black,* Nellen, $8.95. Though set in the East (the Pennsylvania coal-mining country in 1875), Tomlinson's historical detective novel feels like a western. The death of a relatively humane mine-owner is blamed on the Molly Maguires, but the widow thinks differently and hires Seth Warriner, an eccentric sleuth late of Allan Pinkerton's Civil War spy organization, to investigate. Generally, the history and action are fine, the mystery plot only so-so, but the reader is left hoping for future Warriner cases.

*** Jerry Weissman: *The Zodiac Killer,* Pinnacle, $2.25. In a sense, this is another historical novel, though set no longer ago than the late 1960s in San Francisco. It's an effective fictional case history, speculating on the motivation and personality of the still unidentified Zodiac killer. The author changes the San Francisco *Chronicle* reporter who was the recipient of the Zodiac's letters from a Paul to a Paula.

*** Colin Dexter: *Service of All the Dead,* St. Martin's, $9.95. While the contemporary British whodunit may have better all-rounders—P. D. James, Ruth Rendell, Julian Symons—none is closer in spirit to the Golden Age puzzle-makers than Dexter. This one, despite an interesting church background and the increasing depth of Chief Inspector Morse's character, ultimately seems a bit too complicated and convoluted

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to sustain credibility. It's ambitious but not up to Dexter's last couple of books.

*** Sara Woods: *Proceed to Judgement,* St. Martin's, $8.95. If C. P. Snow had taken time out between the volumes of his *Strangers and Brothers* sequence to write the Perry Mason novels, they might have come out sounding something like the Antony Maitland series, among the cosiest of the cosy school of British detection. Barrister Maitland's latest case is about medium for the series, character insights and a generous measure of courtroom action making up for the occasional heavy going.

*** Mike Fredman: *You Can Always Blame the Rain,* St. Martin's, $8.95. Though several factors differentiate Willie Halliday from the typical fictional private eye—he operates out of London, is a teetotaling vegetarian, and studies Eastern religions—he goes through some very familiar paces in his first case. He scatters wisecracks, gets hit over the head, and finds most of the women in the case (all beautiful, whether client, ex-wife, secretary, or wayward daughter) are after his body. It's a durable recipe, though, and Halliday is a likeable addition to the ranks.

** Joseph Mark Glazner: *Smart Money Doesn't Sing or Dance,* Warner Books, $1.95. Financial consultant Billy Nevers is another first-time starter who acts a lot like a traditional private eye, including the obligatory blow on the head. Nevers buys a Rembrandt painting at auction for an unknown client and spends the rest of the book trying to stay alive and collect his fee. The plot is over-complicated but briskly paced, except for an overdose of exposition in the denouement. The reader has the added challenge (or irritation) of trying to figure out whether the locale is the U.S. or Canada.

** Winfred Van Atta: *The Adam Sleep,* Doubleday-Crime Club, $7.95. This one starts with an irresistible hook: a 12-year-old boy, rescued unconscious from a meat locker, claims under sodium pentothal to be the son of an Ice Age man. The story doesn't live up to its early promise, though. Van Atta is a facile storyteller, but a faulty ear for contemporary speech and a tendency toward the slickness and lachrymosity of a TV doctor-show betray him.

** Warren Murphy: *Missing Link,* Pinnacle, $1.75. Too great a reliance on current events gives this latest Destroyer novel (#39) the staleness of a several-months-old newspaper. In an adventure involving the President's beer-drinking brother-in-law, the satire is heavier-handed than usual and the rhetoric shrilly right-wing, though the tale is fast and readable as ever. Richard B. Sapir has apparently left collaborator Murphy to carry on as a single.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 550th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. . . In the thirty-nine years of EQMM's existence we have published numerous stories with sports backgrounds—murder and mayhem in every major sport—baseball, football, basketball, horse racing, skiing, tennis, swimming, hockey, prizefighting. But now we realize that one sport has eluded us—professional wrestling. . .

The author, Mark Silverstein, is in his late twenties, a mathematician employed by NASA. He was "a member of a data analysis team involved with Voyager's mission to Jupiter."

Mr. Silverstein has always wanted to be a writer. Every one of his early manuscripts earned him no more than a plain or fancy rejection slip. In 1976 he enrolled in the Writer's Digest School—in their Fiction Course titled Writing To Sell. He completed the course in three years, marveling at the patience of his teacher, Mrs. Louise Boggess. Her patience and Mr. Silverstein's perseverance now validate the title of the Writer's Digest Course . . .

MURDER ON THE MAT

by MARK SILVERSTEIN

Wildman Benton wrested the autograph book from my grasp and crashed it over my head. I hit the mat hard. Opening my eyes, I found a foot flying toward my face. Shifting, I took the kick in the meaty part of my chest. Three more kicks and Wildman pulled me up by the hair and sent me back to the canvas with a bone-crushing chop to the throat. Unless I got my act together, Benton would become the new heavyweight wrestling champion of the world.

Somewhere in the distance the crowd cheered for me. I raised

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myself to my knees, struggling to breathe. My allergies alone made it difficult. I didn't need some maniac trying to sever my windpipe. Through a red haze I saw Benton tearing open the turnbuckle pad at one of the ring posts with his teeth. He gnawed on the stuffing, chewing it and spitting it at the crowd. As my eyes focused, Benton's face lit up as if he suddenly remembered me. He grabbed a handful of stuffing and raked it across my eyes.

The flames of a thousand fire-irons seared my vision. I had asked for this match. In a match the previous month Benton had badly beaten Vertue Goode to get a crack at me. Wildman had hospitalized the boy and claimed that was only the beginning. He boasted to reporters that he would cripple every opponent the promoters gave him until he faced "that yellow dog of a champion, Buck Yates." Having worked my way up through the ranks, I hated seeing young newcomers used as stepping stones, crushed beneath that bum's feet. Besides, nobody calls me a yellow dog.

When my eyesight returned, I tore into Benton without holding back.

Although Benton grabbed another handful of stuffing from the turnbuckle pad, I broke his momentum with a series of forearm smashes, followed by a dropkick topped by an arm whip that sent Wildman through the ropes to the concrete floor below. Referee Joe Phillips motioned me back and began an incredibly slow count. As the referee of the Benton-Goode bout, he should have stopped that match long before the rookie became seriously injured.

Phillips, a pharmacist by profession, displayed incompetence as a ref, and I'd heard that he sold amphetamines to the athletes who train with pills. Now, at the count of 20, he raised my arm to the delight of 18,000 screaming fans. I left the ring quickly because the next bout featured Indian Sencovic versus Bruno the Rasslin' Bear, and they needed time to set up the bear's cage.

Bruno's trainer had taught the bear to follow the rules of wrestling. The bear charged at the sound of the first bell, returned to his corner at the sound of the second bell, and broke every hold at the slap of the referee's hand on his back. With the bear wearing a muzzle and protective gloves, Bruno's act was entertaining, but a little too gimmicky for my taste.

I prepared to leave when I noticed Mac approach Wildman Benton. Everyone liked Mac, our little man Friday around the various arenas. He set up the rings, saw to our costumes, and escorted us to and from the dressing rooms. He always spoke a good word for

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winner and loser alike. I remember how he seemed to take a personal interest in Vertue Goode, a fledgling grappler. Attentions like these made Mac special to all of us.

The little old guy motioned for Dr. Stillwood to come forward. I froze. The ring doctor expressed his distaste by flicking a speck of dust from his suit before he knelt over Benton, who still hadn't moved.

Our promoter, ex-wrestler Cowboy Jack Darcy, also headed for the ring. Cowboy Jack got his name from the ten-gallon hat and six-shooter that he wore before every match, back in his wrestling days. Having an ex-wrestler as your promoter makes for a good working relationship. But for the fact that they drew huge crowds, Darcy hated loud-mouthed cripplers like Benton as much as I did. Knowing Benton and I both wanted a crack at each other, Cowboy Jack had lost no time in signing the bout.

By the time the promoter joined the small group at ringside, Doc pronounced Wildman Benton dead. Darcy grabbed my arm. "I don't know what you did to him, but Darcy Promotions will stand by you all the way," Jack said.

All the way through what, I wondered. I found out a few hours later.

About nine o'clock that evening in Detective Lieutenant Jacob Zacoboski's office the detective charged me with first-degree murder.

"What kind of fast count are you giving me?" I demanded.

He pointed to a video-tape machine. "The boys in the D.A.'s office uncovered this tape at the TV studio of a television interview in which you spoke about your prematch feelings toward this afternoon's bout with Benton," he said.

He started the tape recorder and I heard myself threaten Benton. "I watched Wildman Benton put Vertue Goode in the hospital. I heard him call me a yellow dog. Okay! He wanted a shot at me, he's getting it. But I'm not going out there to wrestle Wildman Benton. When I get him in that ring I'm gonna kill him. You hear me? I'm gonna kill him!"

"All right," I said, jabbing the tape-player's OFF switch. "I know what I said. The promoter wants me to say these things on television so people will come out to the matches. It's just advance publicity, it doesn't mean anything," I protested. But I knew that an innocent man shouldn't look as worried as I looked. Desperately I fought for control.

Zacoboski aimed a bony finger at me. "Maybe you meant it more

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than you know. You see, I've been a wrestling fan for many years. I saw you wrestle fifteen years ago," he said. What the hell did he mean? "I saw you at the National Arena in Washington, D.C." he added.

My mouth dried. "They carried you out on a stretcher. Remember?" he said quietly.

"Yes," I shouted as the memory of a long-forgotten night returned to my mind. Fifteen years ago, as a no-talent kid in a match designed solely to show off the abilities of the top contender, I had nearly died. I left the ring on a stretcher. I listened to the crowd scream, "Fake!" as my blood dripped to the arena floor. I had served as the stepping stone that night.

The detective interrupted my thoughts. "So you saw it happen to some other poor kid all over again. Your experience fifteen years ago drove you to revenge. You even announced your plans on television. You killed Wildman Benton this afternoon. Right?"

While a messenger brought in an autopsy report on Benton's body, I thought quickly. These guys had me in a submission hold with no escape. Okay, Zacoboski had me pinned for a while, but the mention of the lab report jarred my mind to something I should have noticed about Benton's fall from the ring. I must be free to prove my innocence.

When the messenger left, only Zacoboski, the police stenographer, and a detective sergeant remained in the room. I couldn't know if my wrestling abilities matched the capabilities of a roomful of cops, but with surprise in my favor I decided to give it my best shot.

As Zacoboski read the lab report, I leaped in the air and dropkicked the sergeant. The stenographer rushed toward me, but I grabbed his arm and whipped him into the sergeant who was trying to get up. The stenographer keeled over. Zacoboski rose in time to collide with the sergeant.

When the dust cleared, I remained the only one standing. I grabbed some tissues for my allergy-stricken nose from a box on Zacoboski's desk and quickly strode out of the building.

Catching a bus, I went over it all again in my mind. I saw Wildman react to my blows. He had barely blocked. He had hardly resisted. Then I saw him fly through the ropes. He didn't grab the rope to break his fall. No professional wrestler ever gets so dazed that he forgets to break his fall. Wildman Benton appeared drugged.

My destination: Phillips' drug store.

I sneezed as I entered referee Joe Phillips' place. He locked a

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chemical cabinet and turned to me. "What the hell do you want?"

The druggist folded his arms across his chest and walked over to where I stood. He tried to appear formidable. Actually, Phillips looked as incompetent in his drug store as he did in the ring. I picked up a rubber ball from the counter and began to squeeze it. "Did Wildman Benton look a little strange to you this afternoon?" I asked slowly so as to let it sink in.

Phillips shook his head nervously. "You don't want to buy anything, get out!" His reedy voice shook.

"Benton looked very strange to me, almost like a drugged man." I increased my pressure on the ball while Phillips pointed a quivering finger at me. "If you don't get out of here, I'll call the cops."

He reached for the phone but stopped when the ball in my hand popped. I dropped the broken ball and took Phillips gently by the wrist.

"Athletes talk a lot around the gym. I know you're selling amphetamines and anabolic steroids to the suckers who feel they need a little extra to pin their opponents. Now, do we talk to each other or to the police?" I began to squeeze his wrist.

Phillips broke into tears. "All right! Benton *was* drugged this afternoon. I only supplied the stuff. Some creep drugged him. I had to do it. This creep would have exposed my drug deals if I didn't help him with Benton. Now let go my arm, will you?"

"What creep? Who threatened to expose you?" I asked.

Immediately following his confession, Phillips' body jerked into the medicine cabinet and sank to the floor. I stood frozen as a gun clattered to the floor, and the front door slammed shut. By the time I reached the door, Phillips' killer had vanished.

I picked up the gun. It was as distinctive a six-shooter as those the old cowboys used. I'd seen it before. Cowboy Jack Darcy wore it every time he had wrestled. And at that moment two police officers entered the drug store.

"Hey," one of them said. "That's Yates. Looks as if he shot the druggist."

I quickly raised the gun. "Nobody move," I said. I might've made a clean getaway if I hadn't sneezed. When I regained control, one officer wrestled me for the gun while the other reached for his own. I flung myself away from the officer who was grappling with me, and suppressing panic at the sight of the rising gun, kicked the other officer. As he doubled over, I followed with an elbow smash to the back of his neck. Before he hit the floor I went back to his

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still off-balance partner. I pulled his left arm over behind him and put him away with a stiff punch.

With another murder, two assault charges, and resisting arrest, I was one fall down and had one shoulder on the mat with a count of two. Even so, I must see it through because that gun belonged to my promoter, a man who never really cared for rule breakers like Wildman Benton.

At half-past ten Cowboy Jack Darcy answered his doorbell. He pulled me inside, muttering that half of the city's police force were searching for me. Only then did I notice the blood-soaked towel he held to the side of his head.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"Got clobbered from behind. I'm getting old. Twenty years ago I'd have taken that crack on the head and pinned the bum. Whoever he was, he ransacked my files and stole my personnel folder on one of the boys. He also stole that old six-shooter I used to wear in the ring."

I reached into my waistband and returned the gun, explaining the events of Phillips' death.

"I can't get too broken up about Phillips," Jack replied, "but I do have some more bad news for you. Danny MacPherson is dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I answered. "Who's Danny MacPherson?"

"You knew him as Vertue Goode. He died this evening at the hospital."

My muscles turned to liquid and I clutched the table for support. I had got into this mess for that poor kid's sake. And now for his sake I would finish it.

"Okay," I said, "Benton's murderer came here, rifled your files, stole your gun, bopped you on the head, and then killed Phillips, who was the only man who could identify him. What would the killer want with a wrestler's personnel folder?"

"Beats me," Darcy replied. "My secretary and I are the only ones who ever read them."

I dropped onto Darcy's sofa and pondered this. "Which folder did he take?" I asked.

"Vertue Goode's."

I stretched out and asked Darcy if he had anything for my allergies. I had left my stuff at the police station, the stuff Doc Stillwood gave me before every bout. I thought about Doc. He had examined both Benton and me before our match. If Benton was drugged, why hadn't Doc noticed it? Unless Doc had drugged Wildman?

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Darcy became melancholy. "It's a crazy business. Chewing turnbuckles, bodies slamming each other, murdering each other. I don't know why I got into it," he moaned.

I blew my nose once and bolted upright. It hit me like a flying dropkick. The answer was crystal-clear but it had escaped me until Darcy spoke. "That's it! Give me a half hour start, then call the police. Tell them to meet me at the arena. I think I know who killed Benton, how and why"—and I shot out the door.

I reached the arena at midnight. The cops apparently had finished their investigation. The local security man who remained at the arena bought my story about leaving something in a locker.

As I approached the ring I noticed Bruno the Rasslin' Bear standing in his cage at one corner. Old Mac was feeding him.

I stepped through the ropes and sneezed.

"Evening," the old guy smiled. "The cops just left, so it's time for me to take down the ring. Bruno likes to keep me company."

"Cops find anything?" I asked. Bruno shook the bars on his cage. I guess he figured I'd entered the ring to wrestle with him.

"Didn't find nothing," Mac grunted as he began his sweeping.

"That's because they didn't know where to look." I smiled as I put my hand on a turnbuckle pad.

Mac stepped out of the ring onto the apron. "What do you mean?" He looked puzzled.

I tore the pad from the turnbuckle. "They didn't think of examining the padding on any of these turnbuckles. If they did, they would have found the drug that Phillips gave you." I waved the pad over my head as if it were the championship belt.

The smile faded on the old man's face, but I didn't stop. "Nobody knows us as you do. You know our routines, our acts, our gimmicks. You knew Benton would chew up a turnbuckle, so you put some kind of dope in the padding. It drugged Benton enough so that he couldn't break his fall. You knew a match with me would kill him." I searched Mac's face for some indication that I'd accused the wrong man.

Mac smiled again. "Now it sounds like that sneezing of yours has rattled your brains some. Why would I want to kill Benton?" He walked toward Bruno's cage. Although he stroked the bear's coat, the beast remained unsettled and continued to eye me.

"Revenge," I replied. "Tonight somebody broke into Cowboy Jack Darcy's home to steal Vertue Goode's personnel file. Why would anybody steal a wrestler's file? The thief did it because he didn't

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want anyone to find a record that Vertue Goode's real name was Danny MacPherson. MacPherson or *Mac*—your name. Danny was your son. You set up Benton's murder as revenge for your son's injuries, and you murdered Phillips because he was the referee who allowed Benton to maul your son."

Mac's eyes shone oddly. "And your proof?" he challenged.

"Knowing you and you alone set up the ring, this turnbuckle pad is my proof."

His face suddenly fell apart. "Don't you understand? For all your talk I knew you wouldn't really hurt Benton. But that Wildman killed my boy. He had to die. Don't you understand?" Mac looked pleadingly at me for an answer.

I lowered the pad, trying to find some words for this man I'd called a friend.

Then with a speed that belied his age, the old man flung open Bruno's cage and rang the bell. "You brought this on yourself."

I watched the behemoth charge out of his cage and realized that he no longer wore his gloves and muzzle. A moment of panic froze me. In that moment Bruno cut the ring in half and swung at me, slashing through clothes and flesh. Blood oozed from my middle. Next thing I knew, a bearhug began to squeeze the life from me. I couldn't breathe, me, Buck Yates, champion wrestler of the world!

As a final attempt to survive, I tapped the bear on the shoulder as the referee would to break an illegal hold. The brute immediately released me. I got to my feet and attempted a flying dropkick. I collided with fur-covered granite and fell to the mat, close to the timekeeper's bell.

The bear immediately jumped on top of me. As I stared into the jaws of death, the timekeeper's bell rang in my mind. I reached out and desperately pulled the cord. Bruno, thinking the bell signified the end of the bout, calmly rose and lumbered back to his cage.

I stood up. "It's all over," I told Mac.

"No!" the old man screamed as he raced up the aisle toward the exit. Detective Lieutenant Zacoboski caught him. "Book him. First-degree murder," he said to a police officer.

Zacoboski, after talking with Darcy, had also identified the murderer. Although I still had to answer for roughing up five cops, the detectives let me have my cuts tended to, then allowed me to go to my hotel room where a running nose kept me awake the rest of the night. I'd seen what revenge could do to a man. I saw what it almost did to me. But I'd won my bout with murder.

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a *NEW* short story by

BARBARA CALLAHAN

The late Anthony Boucher, of beloved memory, had a special adjective he used to describe a short story he particularly liked—a "lovely" story, he would say, and those who knew Tony knew how deeply appreciative and significant that word "lovely" was to him. Every once in a while we publish a story that reminds us of Tony's beautiful word. Barbara Callahan's "Hidden Springs" is such a story . . .

HIDDEN SPRINGS

by BARBARA CALLAHAN

Last week after I finished bleachin' apples, I sat in the rockin' chair on the porch and watched that storyteller, Frank, straddlin' the steppin' stones in Reuben's Creek. Two college kids was with him, Sally and Keith, real nice young folks. By the time Frank and the kids reached my steps they'd raised up a thirst, so I gave them cups'a water from the well Pappy dug over 45 years ago.

Frank, he introduced himself as the nephew of Silas Coates, a distant kin'a ours who quit these hills years ago to work in the lumber mill down Lawrenceville way. Frank told me he was a book-writer who was undertakin' a long story about mountain folks who was his kin. "Tracin' my roots," Frank said he was doin'. Then Frank said him and the kids who he called his re-searchers wanted to ask me questions about old-timey customs that I should answer in my own words and to tell them how me and my family followed the mountain ways. I'd be helpin', Frank said, "to add flavor and authen-ti-ci-ty" to his story. Well, Frank and the kids seemed right friendly and I do get afflicted with loneliness livin' here by myself, so I said I didn't mind talkin' to them.

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Sally and Keith, they had big thick copybooks with heaps'a questions written inside and they read off the questions and wrote down whatever I said. The kids asked me about makin' soap and slaughterin' hogs and plantin' by the signs'a the moon and the stars. Lordamercy, how fast their words came trottin' out! I almost swooned from usin' up so much breath to keep up with their chatter.

Finally that Keith, he grinned and said he really wanted to ask about moonshinin'. Well, Sally, she kicked Keith in the shins and Frank, he scowled at the boy. Sally and Frank was steamin' higher than Pappy's old still because they thought Keith had caused me to become wary'a them. "Now don't fret, Sally and Frank," I said. "Moonshinin' weren't nothin' to be ashamed of. My pappy hisself run a still and folks claimed his stillin' was the best in the county."

So Sally and Frank, they stopped tormentin' Keith and we all sat here on the porch. I told them how Pappy named this porch "The Lookout" because my mama and me, we'd sit here, weavin' oak splits into baskets, a chore we could do whilst our eyes wandered down the hill through the hickory trees to catch sight of the law. If we seen any federal people, Mama'd take my basket and shove it behind her chair whilst I run around back'a the cabin to drop pebbles through the evergreen boughs that covered the roof'a the lean-to. When Pappy and my brother Willis heard them pebbles droppin', they'd shut down the still and skeedaddle.

Frank, he wanted to know how we knowed who was federal. That was easy. The federal people was strangers. The sheriff and his deputies was neighbors or kinfolk who knowed the government didn't take kindly to stillin'. Sometimes the sheriff and his men was obliged to break up the stills but they weren't happy about doin' it.

Sheriff Luther Cox, now he was a real gentleman. He'd take his axe to the still, apologizin' to Pappy all the while, tellin' Pappy how he didn't like the excise tax neither and that he knowed Pappy did stillin' to help raise up his family. "I know yer jest doin' yer job, Luther," Pappy'd say. Then Pappy'd go to the springhouse and take out one'a them jars painted on the outside to look like buttermilk was inside'a it. Pappy and the sheriff'd pass that jar back and forth till the sheriff stood up kind of wobbly-like and say, "You make the best buttermilk in the whole county, Jacob."

After I finished tellin' Frank and them kids about moonshinin', I half expected to see Pappy and Willis haulin' sugar bags for the still until I recollected that the still ain't here no more and neither is Pappy nor Willis. I ain't a child no more. Come April I'll be 61

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years old. Around these hills 61 ain't old but lately I'm findin' I doze off when my thoughts get heavy and I don't wake up till the chipmunks start promenadin' on the porch roof or the sun starts borin' into my eyes.

That storyteller, Frank, he must'a noticed how my eyes misted up when I talked about Pappy and Willis so he asked me if I'd talk about quiltin' and bottomin' chairs. Sally, she got real excited about them subjects, so she jest shot me questions harder than hail-stones till Frank finally said, "Whoa. Let's give Mrs. Payne time to collect her thoughts."

"Miss Payne," I said. Frank blushed and stammered, "Oh, I'm sorry." I wanted to lift Frank's embarrassment off'a him, so I said, "You ain't got no cause to be sorry, Frank. I ain't your mama."

Directly I wanted to bite off my tongue for funnin' with their boss in front'a them kids but them kids jest hooted and laughed to bust. Sally and Keith weren't bashful at all. Maybe it's better that kids today don't hold no shame about sech things. Frank was mad at them kids, so I recollected Aunt Sarah Payne's old sayin' when members of the family was gettin' ready to whup each other. "Foodin' stops feudin'," she'd say in her soft, little-bitty voice. I asked Frank and the kids into the cabin for some carrot puddin' and cracklin' bread. Law, even that bony Sally asked me for second helpin's.

After they'd done eatin', Sally skipped around the room and squealed over the friendship quilt settin' on the old featherbed. I showed Sally the names of the women who worked on the quilt and stitched their names into the patches. The friendship quilt belonged to my mama. Pappy never held with me goin' to no quiltin' bees. "Yer slow about yer work, girl," he'd say. "Yer always woolgatherin'. I can't letcha off'a this farm. The first young buck come along'd have his way with ya."

Pappy didn't have no booklearnin' but he was smart about me. I woolgathered when I shucked corn or stirred the hominy or gathered pears in the old of the moon. Always in my woolgatherin' up till I was 16 years old, I was wearin' Aunt Sarah Payne's lacy white weddin' gown, the gown that she gave to Mama to store at our place on account of the moths that was feastin' on it at her cabin. Yep, Pappy was smart about me.

Sometimes my thoughts trip out'a my mouth and I heard myself tellin' Sally, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." Sally put down the quilt and looked at me peculiar because we hadn't been talkin' about plantin'. Then Frank thanked me for the hospitality and asked me

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if he could leave a little black machine with me, a tape recorder he called it. Frank showed me how to talk to the machine by fillin' up a tape with my thoughts. He said he understood how hard it was for me to answer questions without time to think on them first. He started showin' me the buttons on the recorder and seemed downright surprised to find I could read what the buttons said. Six years'a schoolin' I had before Mama took the fever and died.

Frank wrote a heap'a questions on sheets of yellow paper and told me to take my time answerin' them, that he wouldn't be back till next week. Before they left him and the kids told me they had a right good time.

As soon as they was gone, I studied them questions and the machine. I weren't ascairt of the recorder but I found three'a them questions devilish mean because they roused hurtful memories that crawled partway out'a my mind like wounded creatures beggin' to be unsnared. I tried not to pay no mind to them three troublesome questions but they hankered to get freed'a the traps in my mind. Finally I picked up the little microphone and read off the first of them three questions: "Did you ever know a Dowser?"

"Yep, Frank," I answered. "I knowed a Dowser, jest one." Then I started talkin' about dowsin' like I was in the one-room schoolhouse recitin' a lesson to my teacher. I told Frank how the Dowser found water by puttin' one end'a the stick in his mouth and holdin' the other end with his thumb until the dowsing stick would twitch and act plumb crazy when it was passed over a hidden spring. Then my mind took to dowsin' and swayin' over currents deep inside'a me till them currents bubbled up and swamped that machine.

I told the recorder about me bein' 15 years old and watchin' the Dowser that Pappy had sent for to find a spot to sink a new well. Wore a frockcoat, Dowser did, and looked like a preacher. But Dowser weren't no preacher. He didn't ask the Lord's blessin' on his chore nor did he give thanks when he found the Lord's own spring. Dowser jest stood on the spot the stick pointed out whilst Pappy marked the place with twigs and brought him four buttermilk jars filled with Pappy's best.

Whilst Dowser was waitin' for the moonshine he fixed his fiery eyes on me and I felt like I was bein' branded by the hot coals of Lucifer hisself. Dowser weren't old and he weren't young. A heap'a lines scored his face. They weren't thinkin' lines nor worryin' lines. They was hatin' lines.

Now Aunt Sarah Payne, she was sittin' beside me, her bein' a new

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widow and stayin' with us a spell whilst she grappled with her melancholy. A shiver run through her plump body when Dowser's eyes lit on her. For a minute I thought she'd swoon like she done at Uncle Fergus' buryin', her bein' delicate and soft, not like the other women in the family, but Aunt Sarah leaned towards me and whispered, "Dowser's got power, good power and bad power. You stay away from him, hear?"

I promised Aunt Sarah I would and that weren't hard because nobody knowed Dowser's name nor where he lived nor where he came from. My brother Willis, he used to say Dowser were a haint, a ghost from the cemetery on Weepin' Woman Hill, and he wore a frockcoat with the collar turned up to hide his neck where there was a scar, Willis said, from Dowser's bein' lynched by folks years ago for holdin' back his power when drought troubled the land. As God's own punishment to him, Dowser had to leave his grave every time someone needed a well. "That's why he looks so mean," Willis said, " 'cause he's plumb tired out from never gettin' a good deadman's sleep."

I didn't hold with Willis' opinion about Dowser, so one day after gatherin' berries near Weepin' Woman Hill, I left my pail and tiptoed into the graveyard. All them crows and bluejays was chatterin' mighty loud but I kept myself as quiet as a sinful thought to show them dead folks I held them in respect. Around the graveyard I walked, lookin' at the plots and didn't find one'a them with loose dirt or a slanted marker like they'd have if Dowser came thumpin' out'a the ground.

But I did see a sign in the dirt at the gate to the graveyard, the sign that summoned Dowser. If a farmer wanted to find a spot to sink a well, he'd draw a big letter V in the dirt, the V standin' for the divinin' rod Dowser used. Oncet the Brownell boys who was always up to mischief scratched Dowser's sign in the dirt and wrote their Pappy's name under the V when their Pappy didn't need no well. Dowser, he come checkin' the graveyard like he did every day and seen the sign and waited for Mr. Brownell to lead him to his farm. Long about noon Dowser must'a knowed them boys was funnin' him, so he found the Brownell place by hisself.

Dowser, he didn't say a word to nobody. He just took his dowsin' stick and walked through the Brownell place to the cornfield behind the barn where the dowsin' stick started twitchin'. Mr. Brownell who was sorely puzzled by Dowser's visit had followed him and he pushed aside some cornstalks and found his son Thaddeus, the six-

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teen-year-old, huggin' and kissin' the Simpson girl.

Lordamercy, how Mr. Brownell whupp'd that boy! And he gave Dowser jars'a okra and souse in appreciation. After that nobody drawed signs in the dirt for Dowser unless they really wanted a well. I was ascairt of Dowser before Aunt Sarah Payne told me about the Brownell boy but after hearin' that story Dowser became my nightmare man.

"How'd Dowser know Thaddeus and the Simpson girl was there in the cornfield, Aunt Sarah?" I asked.

Well, Aunt Sarah's pretty face turned all red like it done whenever she was obliged to talk about "indelicate" things. She said, "Dowser finds water, child, and a heap'a kissin' and huggin' raises up a sweat. And sweat is water, very salty water."

Well, I made a vow on the spot not to go kissin' and huggin' and I held true to that vow till the night I wore Aunt Sarah Payne's lacy white dress in the moonlight. Anyways, when word of the Brownell boy got around, Dowser started receivin' signs in the graveyard from folks wantin' him to track down runaways and sech. When the Simpson girl told her little sister she was runnin' off to Lawrenceville, Mr. Simpson summoned Dowser who found her three miles from home crouchin' in a laurel thicket. She was sweatin' and cryin' which is both watery things, so I guessed that's how Dowser found her.

The federal people, they heard about Dowser's trackin' power and they tried to summon him to find a prisoner in the hills but Dowser never answered their sign. Folks thought that Dowser like theirselves didn't take kindly to the federal people or else that Dowser thought prisoners didn't sweat nor cry.

Lordamercy, I sure wandered off the path of Frank's question about a Dowser and told the machine so much foolishness. But I felt good talkin' about them things and I knowed how the straw must feel when it's pulled out'a the mattresses and aired in the spring. Dowser's still my nightmare man and he hovers over the next two questions. The next question I was drawed to from Frank's batch was "Did you ever know a Granny Woman?"

"Yep, Frank," I said to the microphone, "I knowed a Granny Woman, a midwife you'd call her now. The Granny Woman was God's own creature, wise and comfortin'. Mrs. Florence Trumbill, she'd ride her mule as far away as ten miles right up till she was near seventy to help a woman birth her baby. Out'a her black bag Mrs. Florence Trumbill'd take her clean white apron and white cap

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and clean white cloths. Then she'd go to work, massagin' and coaxin' and bearin' down right along with the mother, all the time holdin' the woman's hand. Over four hundred babies was helped into the world by Mrs. Florence Trumbill. After the birthings Mrs. Trumbill'd cook dinner for the family and stay on with them for at least a week till the mother and the family got the hang'a the new baby. Nowadays the women go to the clinic down Lawrenceville and have all the mod'rn conveniences but there ain't nothin' invented that'd take the place of the Granny Woman."

Mrs. Florence Trumbill, now she didn't have no special tools, no magic wand like Dowser but she must'a had a third eye that could see deep down into the whirlpools of a person's soul. Somehow she knowed when a body was cryin' inside. I recollect how hard she looked at me durin' the revival meetin' at Carson's Field seven months after I wore Aunt Sarah Payne's lacy white dress and danced by myself in the moonlight till the stranger with the quiet voice and nice smile came out'a the woods and waltzed with me till we both fell down in a heap from spinnin' and spinnin' around.

At the revival, whilst Pappy and Willis was renouncin' Satan at the altar call, I stood off by myself wonderin' if I was sinnin' by prayin' to the Lord that the stranger would come back to me like he said he would and that he'd be powerful happy when I told him about the baby. All of a sudden Mrs. Florence Trumbill touched my arm and beckoned for me to follow her to the apple orchard.

That Granny Woman, her eyes didn't travel over my loose dress like Pappy's did when he said, "Yer eatin' too much, girl, and workin' too little." Mrs. Florence Trumbill jest pushed the hair out'a my eyes and said, "You're lookin' mighty peaked, child. When you need me, I'll come to you."

Well, I jest thanked her and shook my head in wonderment at Mrs. Florence Trumbill's third eye, the one that could read the thoughts that was stuck inside'a you and couldn't get out.

A month later when the pains started, I left the cabin after Pappy and Willis went hayin' in the south pasture. I was standin' next to Reuben's Creek wishin' the Lord'd part the waters for me like He done for His people at the Red Sea when I seen Mrs. Trumbill standin' on the other side, holdin' her black bag and gettin' ready to cross the steppin' stones. "Stay there," she hollered. "I'm comin' over. I dreamed about you last night and I always pay heed to my dreams."

Mrs. Trumbill helped me back into the cabin and into the feather

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bed. Then she put on her white cap and white apron and was jest takin' a cloth from her bag when the baby birthed herself.

Mrs. Florence Trumbill worked a long time on the baby, even to takin' butter and puttin' some in the infant's mouth to bring up phlegm that might'a been blockin' her breathin'. But nothin' helped. Mrs. Trumbill, she stroked my hair and took care'a me, then she told me to lay quiet whilst she went outside to Pappy's pile of pinewood.

After talkin' about Mrs. Trumbill I had to turn off the recorder for a spell. She's gone now but these hills is filled with folks whose first inklin' of human kindness came from the hands of that Granny Woman. To answer the last and most troublesome question, I had to turn the tape over like Frank showed me. I sat thinkin' for a long time, quarrelin' with myself about whether to keep talkin', but I'd been feelin' a curious kind'a peace since I started, so I pushed the button and said to the microphone, "Can you tell me about burial customs?"

"Yep, Frank," I answered. "I can tell you about the buryin' ways." I told the little tape how the dead person's spirit might'a slipped off by itself but how his kin was surrounded by all the folks who heard the bell tollin' the number'a years the departed one had lived and how they came to the cabin to sit up with the dead and took to singin' quiet church songs together round about midnight. I told the tape how folks brought food to the family and held it a proper honor to be asked to help make the box or dig the grave. Granny Nesbit came to mind when I was tellin' Frank about the buryin' ways. For 35 years Granny Nesbit had her buryin' clothes ready. Made them herself, she did, and aired them in the sun each spring.

After I talked about Granny Nesbit my mind got to dowsin' over them strong currents deep inside'a me and I started tellin' Frank about my little girl's buryin'. Mrs. Florence Trumbill came back into the cabin and started hammerin' a box out'a the pinewood. The box looked so forlorn that I got up and snipped some lace off'a Aunt Sarah Payne's white gown. Before Mrs. Trumbill placed the baby in the box, I had lined the inside with the white lace. Then Mrs. Trumbill made me get back into bed and she set out with the box and a spade towards the hollow.

It jest didn't seem right layin' there without heedin' the buryin' ways more proper, so I got up and went out to the porch. For a spell I stood beside the dinner bell before I started ringin' it and stopped after it sounded eight times, figurin' me and the little girl, we

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knowed each other for eight months. Directly Pappy and Willis come runnin' in from the pasture, thinkin' that the Dillard boy who was eight years old and always strayin' over to our place had fallen down the well or drowned hisself in Reuben's Creek.

Pappy and Willis and some neighbors kept yammerin' at me to tell them why I rung the bell but I was too ascairt to answer them. When I seen Aunt Sarah Payne come onto the porch, I ran inside the cabin to hide her dress. She ran right after me and spied the dress with the big empty spot gapin' at her hangin' crooked from a nail in the wall. Well, Aunt Sarah started hollerin' and callin' me a demon for shreddin' her dress till I finally told her I needed the cloth for somethin' important.

Aunt Sarah got this canny look in her eye like she was doin' sums in her head. After she totaled the eight rings of the dinner bell along with the extra heaviness I'd been puttin' on, and added to them things the fact that a baby's box is lined with white cloth, she blushed and sighed like she always done when obliged to talk about indelicate things. She turned to Pappy and said, "She had a baby, Jacob, and it died."

Pappy's face went redder than ripe strawberries before he sent the neighbors home after tellin' them we should be alone with our shame. Him and Aunt Sarah jest fired questions at me about who was the father and where was the baby till I jest crawled into bed and covered my ears. Pappy raised his voice and yelled, "Dowser will find the no-account father. Yep, Dowser can find anybody. I'm goin' to summon him now."

When Pappy charged out'a the door, he bumped into Mrs. Florence Trumbill who was standin' on the porch, holdin' the spade, her apron all streaky with dirt.

"The baby's father was a stranger passin' through these hills, Jacob," she said. "Dowser won't find him. And the baby, she never took a breath. I buried her in the hollow in back'a the pine grove."

Pappy, he pulled the spade out'a Mrs. Trumbill's hand and throwed it hard into the woodpile. "Yer a fool, woman," he thundered. "A no-account like that ain't gonna quit these hills. The fox'll tarry as long as there's chickens. He already brung disgrace to our family but I aim to keep him from bringin' sorrow to my neighbors."

After Pappy and Mrs. Trumbill left, Aunt Sarah Payne sat by the bed, rockin' herself and cradlin' the white dress in her arms, croonin' "Dowser will get him. Oh, yes, Dowser will get him. Jest recollect the Brownell boy and the Simpson girl." Aunt Sarah's words worked

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on me like a witch's lullaby and I fell to dreamin' about Dowser, his frockcoat flappin' in the wind as he swooped down on the Brownell boy, the Simpson girl, my stranger, and me.

Before Dowser came the next morning Aunt Sarah tiptoed out'a the cabin, leavin' me alone to hear him climb on the porch where he sat swillin' down the moonshine as Pappy recited the story of our shame in a voice so pitiful it made me cry.

And my cryin' was a sign to me that Dowser'd find my stranger, the kind stranger who told me how pretty I looked in the moonlight. My stranger'd be cryin' too, lost in the hills like he was and yearnin' to come back to me. Men cry too. Yep, they do. I seen men cryin' at weddin's and buryin's. And my stranger'd be sweatin' from climbin' and hikin'. Cryin' and sweatin' was watery things that'd lead Dowser directly to him. I felt so bad that I come down with a fever that gripped me all the way into the dyin' of the moon.

Pappy made me sassafras tea but mostly he took to sittin' on the porch with his huntin' rifle crosst his lap, waitin' for Dowser to bring him the stranger. Pappy gave up runnin' the still and jest drunk the moonshine hisself that he'd already made. Willis, he got tired'a farmin' by hisself and told Pappy he was leavin' for Lawrenceville to work in the mill. Pappy's spirit was too weary to argue with Willis and he left.

When the fever let go'a me, I started hidin' behind the biggest marker in the cemetery to spy on Dowser when he come checkin' for his summonin' sign. I took to trailin' Dowser real quiet-like through the hills, hopin' he'd lead me to my lost stranger, thinkin' that me and my stranger could hog-tie Dowser and run away together. Trackin' Dowser carried me way into October when the air became powerful cold and the winds clawed at the trees.

Mostly Dowser jest circled farms, stealin' pumpkins and squash when he weren't lookin' for a spot to sink a well. Sometimes he'd set traps for small critters but mostly he'd go back to the lean-to he built hisself up atop'a Lookout Ridge where he'd drink the moonshine till his eyes glowed like they'd been seared from starin' into Hell. Dowser weren't lookin' for my stranger. He was takin' Pappy's payments without workin' for them.

On the last day of October, the eve of the haints, I was wore out from climbin' Lookout Ridge on the other side'a Dowser's hidey place and I vowed not to come no more when I heard voices rumblin' inside the shack. I crept closer and hid myself behind a thick maple tree to listen. What I heard I can't never forget. I can recite them words

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jest like Dowser and the other man spoke them.

"Drink up, friend," Dowser said. "This stuff's the best in the mountains. I get it once a week from a hillbilly intent on shooting the man who wronged his daughter. The old geezer thinks I'm trailing the varmint."

Dowser's visitor laughed.

"I heard about you in stir," he said. "You were the one that got away, the whole pen's hero. You were my inspiration to bust out."

"I'll drink to that," Dowser said.

Then Dowser's visitor said, "Old-timers like Shorty Grenville and Pump Martin say you're an educated man."

"A certified wreck from Marshall Tech," answered Dowser. "A civil engineer until I turned to banking and a teller and a security guard interfered with my new interest."

Dowser's visitor snorted, then asked, "How come the folks in these hills don't turn you in?"

"They think I've got magic power. They call me Dowser because I find water with this old hickory switch. Hell, these hills are teeming with underground springs. I put on a good show for them by letting this stick go crazy over any likely waterhole. The hillbillies also think I can find lost people and I can. After seven years in prison I like the freedom of roaming these hills. I know every trail and from here I can see everything, all the hiding places for necking couples and runaway kids."

"You got it made," the man said.

Dowser laughed. "The mountaineers got it made too, friend. I'm the guardian angel of every still in these parts. I don't want my sources to run dry, so I protect my clients from the feds. Nine, ten months ago, the feds got tricky and sent an advance scout into these hills, a young fellow dressed like a hiker."

"Yeah," said Dowser's guest, "what did you do?"

Dowser grunted, then must'a filled up with more likker. I stood next to the tree, peelin' bark off, waitin' for his words.

"I let the young fed have his way with a moonstruck farmer's daughter before I threw him down a ravine deeper than Davy Jones', no, Davy Crockett's, locker."

All of a sudden I heard the sound'a hundreds of bees but it were too late in the year for bees. Them bees was swarmin' inside my head, creatin' that woooo noise their wings make when they're coolin' honey in the hives on hot nights. I kept shakin' my head but them bees kept fannin' their wings so I only heard snatches'a the

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rest'a the talkin'—Dowser's tellin' the man he'd guide him to the highway the next mornin' and Dowser's sayin' somethin' about quittin' Lookout Ridge the next day to pass the cold weather in a cabin with the plump windowpane. His talkin' started makin' no sense on account of them bees in my head.

I skittered down the ridge and run through the trails till I reached Reuben's Creek and jumped in to cool my throbbin' head. After I swum acrosst, I hastened to the cabin to dry. A powerful chill overtook me afterwards, so I stayed wrapped in Mama's quilt for two days. Before dawn on the third day'a November I ate a plate of hominy grits that put strength back into my body. I was cravin' to visit Aunt Sarah to beg her to go to the sheriff with me so's I could tell him what I knowed about Dowser, bein' ascairt to go alone lest Dowser seen me scramblin' off the ridge and was spyin' on me from his new hidey place.

I set out for Aunt Sarah's place in the darkness to be covered from Dowser's devil-eyes, hopin' she wouldn't be too deep into her winter melancholy to go to the sheriff's with me. Every year since Uncle Fergus died Aunt Sarah gathered in supplies all durin' October and wouldn't see no family nor friends till March. She said her heart was too froze up with grief to talk to nobody. Uncle Fergus and her never had no young'uns that'd be a comfort to her.

With a full moon guidin' me I reached Aunt Sarah's cabin quick and sat down on the porch to catch my breath when I pierced my hand on an ornery stick. When I picked it up, them bees started carousin' again in my head. The stick were vee-shaped like a dowsin' rod. Fearin' Dowser'd been expectin' me to go to Aunt Sarah's where nobody'd be able to help me, I quick opened the cabin door and went in, gropin' at the place where Uncle Fergus used to keep his huntin' rifle. A heavy coat fell off a hook and jest about smothered me. After grapplin' to get free'a the coat, I got it off 'a my head and seen the moonlight strokin' the sleepin' faces of Dowser and Aunt Sarah.

Directly Dowser's words on the ridge came back to me, the words he spoke when them bees was befuddlin' my hearin'. Dowser didn't say he was goin' to pass the cold weather in a cabin with the plump windowpane. He said he was goin' to pass the cold weather in a cabin with the plump Widow Payne.

Softly I crept over to the stove, then out'a the cabin, knowin' what I had to do. Since Aunt Sarah surely weren't goin' to fetch the sheriff with me, I'd have to fetch him myself. I broke a heap'a branches off'a the pine trees next to Aunt Sarah's cabin and made pineknot

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torches like the ones the posses used at night when they was trackin' criminals. Then I set the torches 'twixt the logs in the railin'a the porch, tellin' myself I was doin' the right thing. Soon as I put a match to one'a them branches, I knowed the sheriff'd see the blaze and reckon a killer was loose in the hills. The sheriff'd know the flamin' signal jest like Dowser knowed his sign in the dirt.

But I couldn't stay and wait for the sheriff. I had to run away from the cabin. Before I knowed it, that one torch had lighted the others and all the waters from all the springs Dowser ever found couldn't have quenched that fire.

I done a heap'a talkin' to Frank on that machine about the buryin' ways but there was so many ways to tell him about. Some folks was buried proper in Weepin' Woman Hill and some was buried in the hollow in little boxes lined with lacy white cloth and some was buried under rocks and twigs deep down in a ravine and some was buried by rafters all black and sooty from fire. And some was buried under ponderous thoughts even though they done their chores and cared for their Pappy till he passed on.

I gave the postman the tape that I packed in a box with Frank's address on it. For a week I sat on the porch feelin' sure that Frank had turned the tape over to the law and waitin' for the sheriff to come for me, but nonetheless experiencin' a peculiar kind'a peace.

When I seen Frank crossin' the steppin' stones today, I was mighty surprised. He ate some more carrot puddin' and cracklin' bread before he took the tape out'a his pocket and said real sorrowful, "Thanks a lot, Miss Payne, but the recorder wasn't working right. There was nothing on the tape. I'll take this machine back and get it fixed. The kids and I'll visit in the spring and talk some more. You take the tape and keep it as a souvenir."

There's nothin' like the ties of kin, even distant kin, to lift a body's spirits up. I like that young fella even though I caught him in a whoppin' big lie. Before I mailed the tape I pushed the re-play button and listened to my mind dowsin' out loud over fearful currents that seem to have settled down.

I walked off'a the porch to wave to Frank and I caught the first snowflake of the season in my hand. Real pretty it was, so lacy and white. For a long time I stood outside watchin' them snowflakes floatin' down and feelin' real thankful that they was tattin' a coverlet that'd reach down into the deepest ravine.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

E. X. FERRARS

What did six-year-old Meg see through the upstairs window as the great flakes of snow hurled themselves against the glass? What did the child see through the open door downstairs that looked like "a strange, white, almost faceless monster"? Simple questions, simple answers, subtle clues . . .

This story will be included in the author's book titled DESIGNS ON LIFE, *to be published by Doubleday next month . . .*

A SENSE OF CRISIS

by E. X. FERRARS

"Mrs. Nettle," the child said. "Mrs. Nettle, it's cold enough for snow, isn't it?"

The elderly woman, sitting in the armchair near the fire, went on with the swift darning of the gray sock stretched over her hand.

"I shouldn't wonder," she agreed.

"*I* think it's going to snow," the child said. "It is, isn't it, Mrs. Nettle?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," the woman said.

"When it snows I'm going to make a snowman," the child said.

Snipping off an end of gray wool, the woman reached for another strand with which to re-thread her needle.

"You need a lot of snow for that," she said.

"Then I hope it snows and snows. I hope it snows all day and all night and all tomorrow and all the day after."

"Nasty messy stuff," the woman said. "Messy and cold and wet."

"But children like snow, don't they?" Turning from the window, the child came to lean on the arm of the old woman's chair. "Mrs. Nettle, they do, don't they, Mrs. Nettle?"

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The corners of the woman's mouth twitched and she lowered her hands and her darning into her lap.

"That's right, love, they do. I should've remembered. All the same, don't you go bringing a lot of slush into the house on your boots, or I'll get after you, I can promise you."

With a deep sigh and her eyes fixed intently on the woman's, as if to extract a different promise, the child said, "I *hope* it starts soon."

"Well, if it doesn't, it'll come some other time, that's something you can be sure of. You've never seen snow, have you, living in Egypt?"

"No."

"And you're six years old."

"That isn't very old," the child said defensively. "There are lots of things I've never seen. I've never seen the Tower of London."

"There are lots of things I've never seen, and won't either," the woman said.

"Have you ever seen an elephant?"

The conversation continued beside the bright fire, while outside the afternoon sky darkened unnaturally early, looking as if it had grown so heavy that it might sink down to rest on the tops of the trees, and the trees bent and tossed their branches wildly, as if they were protesting at the threatened load, and the wind made strange wailing noises in the chimney.

A little before five o'clock the child's mother came home. She came running up the garden path, clutching her fur coat round her with one hand and holding on her little felt hat with the other. Her eyes and her cheeks were bright and her voice was high and gay. She too seemed to be almost bursting with excitement and desire at the thought of the snow. Yet on coming into the room she said at once, "How cold and miserable it looks! Whyever haven't you drawn the curtains?"

"She wouldn't have it," Mrs. Nettle said, rising from the chair by the fire and beginning to roll up her mending. "She was afraid she'd miss the snow. It hasn't started yet, has it, Mrs. Ellis?"

The child was looking with some anxiety at the bright-cheeked young woman who was tugging the warm velvet curtains across the window.

"Mummy," she said, "it *has* started, hasn't it, Mummy? On your coat! That's snow, isn't it? It is, isn't it?" Her voice was rising with each word.

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"Yes, darling, it's just started." Her mother looked down at the small sequins of brightness that spangled the front of her coat. "It's nothing yet, but I shouldn't wonder if it's deep by tomorrow morning."

"How deep?"

"Oh, ever so deep."

"Enough to make a snowman?"

Mrs. Nettle had put her darning away in a cretonne bag. "If you don't mind, Mrs. Ellis," she said, "I think I'll be getting straight home. I'd sooner get home before the road gets slippery. I washed up the lunch things and I put all the tea things on the trolley. You've only to boil the kettle."

"Thank you, Mrs. Nettle, thank you so much." The young woman beat at her coat with her hands so that the little drops of melting snow fell on the carpet. "It was so good of you to stay on. I hope Meg hasn't been too much trouble."

"No, I wasn't any trouble at all," the child said.

The women smiled at each other and Mrs. Ellis went on, "It's so nice to get out sometimes on one's own. I'm really grateful."

"Well, I'll be glad to do it any time, if I can manage it," Mrs. Nettle said. "Did you see a nice picture?"

"Picture?" the young woman said vaguely. She was watching the child, who had gone to the window and, dragging aside one curtain, was pressing her face to the glass.

"Mummy," Meg cried, "it isn't snowing! I can't see anything. I don't believe it's snowing, Mummy."

"That's because of the wind blowing so hard," her mother said. "You'd see it on the other side of the house." She opened her bag to pay Mrs. Nettle what she owed her for sitting-in with the child. "Yes, it was a good film," she added, "really quite good. I enjoyed it."

"Mummy, I can see Mr. Ferguson's house from here," Meg said, rubbing at the mist that her own breath formed on the glass. "He's just turned out all his lights. D'you think he's going for a walk in the snow? D'you think perhaps he's coming over to see us?"

"I'm quite sure he isn't," her mother answered.

Something in her tone, some emphasis or roughness, made Mrs. Nettle lift her eyebrows for an instant. But she lowered them quickly, as if she did not really want to see what she might if she looked longer. Taking the three half-crowns with a murmur of thanks, she said, "Well, I'll see you in the morning, unless I can't

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get here. I don't care for slippery roads. Good night, Mrs. Ellis." Going to the door, she called to the child, "Good night, love."

But Meg was too absorbed in what she could see through the window if she let the curtain fall behind her head, shutting out the light of the room, to answer.

In the distance, across the common, where she had picked the first blackberries that she had ever eaten, during the first weeks that she had spent in England, she could see the lights in Mrs. Nettle's son-in-law's cottage. Beside it, less brightly lit, was the cottage lived in by the Irish family, and the next door to that, the cottage of Mr. Brookes, who sometimes came to help with the garden. But over to the right, where Mr. Ferguson's house stood, and where a few minutes before lights had been shining from half of the windows in the house, there was only darkness. After all, Meg thought, he must have gone out to look at the snow.

She had a great curiosity about Mr. Ferguson. It was not that she liked him much, for whenever he came to the house something very peculiar always happened in it, some deep alteration in its atmosphere that brought a sense of crisis, of things stirring under the surface, almost of peril. Yet he was a cheerful, friendly man who often gave her presents and who had told her how to make a snowman, suggesting that he and she should make one together.

She was not yet quite convinced, however, that snow was really falling. She could see that something was moving in the air, moving with a wavering lightness, like an old lacy shawl being shaken out by hands delicately careful of its fineness. But still she could see nothing unusual on the ground, no shimmer of whiteness, no crystalline glitter.

From her conversations with Mrs. Nettle she remembered a technical term. "Mummy, I don't believe it's going to lay."

"Lie," her mother said.

"Well, I don't believe—" Meg stopped, because she heard her mother give a deep sigh. She came out from behind the curtain. "Don't you like snow either? Mrs. Nettle doesn't. She says—" She stopped again, because it was clear to her that her mother was not listening.

The child looked at her uneasily. It had happened again, the thing that was always happening these days. Her mother had taken off her coat and hat and was sitting in the armchair by the fire, pressing her hands tightly to her temples, holding back the hair from her face, which was drained of all its brightness. Her body, crouched

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crookedly in the chair, looked spent of all its energy, and her eyes, peering deeply into the fire and far beyond it, were dull and empty.

The child resented the abrupt change. Her memory was still very short, yet it seemed to her that in a place called Alexandria, which she had already forgotten far more than she pretended, such sharp transitions as this from excitable gaiety to dreary and unexplained lassitude had hardly ever occurred. She had lived then, she believed, at the heart of a cheerful calm, with an attentive and happy mother to look after her.

Moving restlessly about the room, Meg tried to draw some attention to herself by her fidgeting, but her mother did not even look at her.

Presently Meg asked querulously, "Why hasn't Daddy come home yet?"

"His train hasn't got in," her mother said.

"But it's late."

Her mother glanced at her wristwatch. "No, it's only the snow making it get dark early. All the same, it's time I was getting the tea." She stood up. She was frowning, but as she met the child's gaze, she summoned up a smile. "Did you have a nice afternoon with Mrs. Nettle?"

"Oh, yes, she's an awfully nice person," Meg said, responding eagerly.

"What did you do?"

"We talked."

"All the time?"

"Well, some of the time we played beggar-my-neighbor, and then I drew a picture for her. Mummy, shall we play cards now?"

"I'm going to get the tea," her mother said. "Why don't you go upstairs to the landing window and see if you can see Daddy's train come in?"

"Will you play cards with me after tea?"

"Just one game, if you like. But then off you go to bed."

"All right, but I hope it's a long game—a terrifically long one!" She laughed and ran upstairs to look out of the landing window.

It had been her own discovery, on coming to live in this house, and it had greatly raised its value in her eyes, that from this window she could see the railway tracks, about a quarter of a mile away. Most of the other windows in the house faced in the opposite direction, toward the common, which her parents, to her surprise, considered an asset. However, they had come to realize the virtue,

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particularly on rainy days, of having one window in their house from which it was possible to watch the trains go by.

The most exciting train of the day was naturally the train on which her father returned from his work in the nearby town, or rather, for the first few weeks, this train had been the one that Meg was most eager to see arrive at the station. Recently, for some reason, she had found herself forgetting to watch for it. Her father's arrivals home had somehow changed in their character and she no longer felt the same impatience and eagerness working up in her, as the day wore on, as she had at first.

He had a way now, when he came home, of sitting watching her mother in a heavy silence, answering only absently and nervously when Meg tried to make him talk. Once or twice this had been so unbearable that she had started to scream in an agony of uncontrolled temper, which had had a peculiarly terrible result. No one had blamed her, no one had taken any notice of her, but her father, usually a very quiet and gentle man, had suddenly started to abuse her mother in hideous, bitter words, as if it were she who was kicking, crying, and behaving disgracefully.

At last her mother had answered, "But it's all over—I've told you so again and again. Why can't you believe me?"

"Because I know you, I know what you are," he had shouted.

"Then let's go away from here—far away—as far as you like! Will that convince you?"

"What's the good of going away?" he had asked. "Hasn't it always been the same, wherever we've been, except that you didn't let me know so much about it?"

"Sometimes I think you're crazy," her mother had said.

None of it made any sense to the child, but that scene was the most frightening thing that had ever happened to her, and some of the fear that she had felt then in the midst of her own helpless rage was now projected onto the train that came snaking through the dusk every evening at 5:35, its windows all beautifully glowing.

But this evening she could not think seriously about anything but the snow, and she went upstairs happily to watch for the train. The snow made everything different. For one thing, as she saw as soon as she reached the landing, it had almost completely blocked the window and she was hardly able to see out at all. Great flakes were being hurled against the glass by the north wind. A drift had thickened already along the window ledge. A white crust had formed round the edges of each pane and a fine spray seemed mysteriously

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to be coming straight through the glass itself and falling in tiny crystals on the sill inside.

Through the rapidly thickening curtain, Meg saw a flicker of lights outside in the darkness, telling her that her father's train was arriving, but it was the wonder of the snow itself that held her tense and still. Then suddenly, with a shrill squeal of excitement, she raced downstairs.

"Mummy, it's snowing right into the house!" she shrieked. "Mummy—"

As she reached the bottom of the stairs the hall door opened. A freezing gust blew in from the garden and she saw an extraordinary figure standing there, a figure such as she had never seen before. It had a white hat, a white coat, queer bulky white boots, and even bristling white eyebrows and a white mustache on an oddly gray-white face. Against the darkness it looked enormously tall. Quivering with shock at the surprise, it took the child a moment to recognize her father.

When that happened, she could not help shouting with laughter.

"I thought you were a snowman!" she cried. "You look just like a snowman!" Turning, she rushed on into the kitchen. "Mummy, come and look—Daddy's come home and he looks just like a snowman!"

Her mother was toasting some bread under the grill. She put a hand over her eyes and said in a shaky, muffled voice, "For God's sake don't make such a row—it'll drive me mad!"

Too excited to take much notice of her mother's odd tone, the child ran back to the hall.

Her father was still in the open doorway, but he had turned his back on the house and was beating the snow off the front of his coat with his gloved hands and stamping his feet on the brick doorstep, so that the chunks of snow that had made his boots look so big fell away from them. When he turned again, coming in and closing the door and beginning to unbutton his wet, dark overcoat, he was no longer a strange, white, almost faceless monster, but was the familiar figure who always arrived home at about this time.

The child ran ahead of him into the living room, thinking he would follow her at once, as he usually did, to warm himself at the fire. The room felt delightfully cosy after the cold and drafty landing, though the fire, which her mother had made up with fresh coal before going to make the tea, was not burning well.

Making a great show of warming her hands at it and of stamping

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her feet on the hearthrug, as she had just seen her father do on the doorstep, the child called out, "D'you know the snow's coming right in at the window upstairs, Daddy? But the window's tight shut. I looked and I know it is. Can snow come through glass, Daddy?"

There was no answer and she realized that he had not followed her into the room, but was still in the hall. Yet no sound of voices or of movement reached her from it, and what seemed suddenly stranger, no sound came to her from the kitchen, where a moment before her mother had been moving quickly about, making the tea. The silence in the house was so complete that Meg might have been alone in it.

Instantly the swift panic of her age seized her and she felt utterly convinced that both of her parents had gone away and left her in an empty house in the midst of a terrible storm. She rushed to the door.

They were both there, just inside it, staring at one another across the small hall. The woman's eyes were enormous and terrified in her colorless face, the man's eyes burned feverishly. But there was something so alike in the expressions on their dissimilar faces that for once they bore a strange resemblance to one another. Both of them were shivering.

The woman was the first to speak.

"No!" she said hoarsely in answer, as even the child realized, to something that had not been said. Flinging up one arm, as if to keep something away from her, she repeated it: "*No*!"

The man raised his hands. He raised them only a few inches and looked at them as if he had never seen them before. They must be very cold, the child thought, they were shaking so.

"I didn't know I was going to—I swear to God I didn't. I didn't mean to, I didn't plan—but I had to know, I couldn't bear it any longer. So I came home early. I saw you together. But what happened after that . . ."

He stopped as the woman turned her head sharply to look at the child, standing in the doorway of the living room.

More slowly he also turned his head and they both went on looking at Meg and the silence returned, a silence that made her start to shiver too, though it held her motionless, as though in the most evil of spells.

Mercifully her mother released her from it.

"Go back into the room, go back at once and shut the door," she said in a thin jerky voice. "You'll catch cold out here."

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Quietly the child turned and went back into the room.

She was glad to go, yet the room no longer seemed as warm as before, or as safe and pleasant. As she closed the door, which she did softly, with both hands on the big round doorknob, releasing it very carefully, fearing to contribute by the least heedlessness to the incomprehensible strain of the situation, she heard her mother say in an even stranger tone, "But what will you do now? What shall we—what *can* we do?"

Meg went to the fire and knelt down in front of it. The fresh, piled-up coal, which had hardly begun to burn, was like a rampart between her and the glowing heart of the fire. No flame but only brown, acrid-smelling smoke streamed up the chimney. She felt disgusted with it.

She knew that she was not allowed to touch it and at that moment she had no thought of doing so, but as the minutes passed and no one else came to tend the fire or to bring the tea, the silence and the bleakness of the room began to affect her like an active hostility. An overmastering desire came to her to do something drastic, violent. Grasping the poker, she snatched a quick glance over her shoulder at the closed door, then thrust the point deep into the fire.

At first nothing much happened, but when she had repeated the action two or three times, a little flame came licking up from under a piece of coal. Sitting back, she watched the absorption and saw a second little flame appear, and then another, and then two of them lean toward each other and play together, until, with a sudden roaring, they fused and shot upward in a broad yellow tongue of fire.

As the heat from it stung her cheeks, the child gave a wriggle of pleasure and withdrawing the poker, laid it down on the exact spot from which she had taken it up, so that no one could know that she had been playing with it. Entranced by the new life that she had stirred into being in the fireplace, she watched it with a hypnotized stare and hardly noticed when, a few minutes later, the door opened and her parents came in.

Her mother was pushing the tea trolley, her father was smoking a cigarette. They went to their usual chairs on either side of the fireplace and her mother started to pour the tea. For a little while Meg thought that everything had returned to normal, except that neither of them spoke at all. But this was not really so unusual nowadays that it worried her particularly. Then she noticed that when her mother handed her father his cup of tea, his hands were

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still shaking so much that he slopped half of it into the saucer.

"Are you very cold?" Meg asked solicitously. "Snow's always very cold, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, "that's it, I'm cold." His voice was so low that she could hardly hear it.

"Perhaps you've caught a cold," she said. "When Mrs. Nettle's son-in-law had a cold he lost his voice. Are you losing your voice, d'you think?"

"Perhaps I am," he said.

"If you are," she said, "you won't be able to help me make a snowman tomorrow, will you?"

"Anyway, Daddy has to go to work tomorrow, as usual," her mother said. "I'll help you make a snowman."

It struck the child with faint surprise that work and other commonplace things should go on when there was snow on the ground.

"Mr. Ferguson said he'd help me make a snowman," she said.

Abruptly her father put down his plate, which had some hot buttered toast on it, and put his hands to his head.

"Jim!" his wife said warningly. She went on, "Yes, I'm sure Mr. Ferguson will help you. We'll go over in the morning and ask him."

The man made a queer groaning sound. It distressed Meg, but she thought it might be best not to notice it.

"I think Mr. Ferguson likes snow," she said, "not like Mrs. Nettle. He went out for a walk when it started to snow."

"A walk!" her father cried. "Good God, what made you think—?"

"Jim!" his wife said again. "She saw his lights go out, that's all. *That's all,* do you hear?"

He drew several choking breaths.

"I can't go on with this," he muttered. "I can't go through with it. It's no good, Marion, I'll never be able to do it. I might as well give myself up right away. It'll be better for you both. I'll go. I'll go and tell them . . ." His voice died away.

The woman stooped over the child. "What a mess you're making with all that jam," she said. "Why can't you just eat it, instead of smearing it all over the plate?"

"I like looking at the pattern on the plate through it," Meg said. "It makes it look all pink."

"Well, that isn't good manners."

"Marion, for God's sake—what's the good of it?" the man whispered. "What hope is there?"

The woman straightened up again, looking at him, and one of

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those unspoken messages which, the child had noticed, were always passing between grown-up people, passed between them then. He reached for his wife's hand, clung to it, then started covering it with kisses.

"I don't know, I don't understand, why you're doing this for me—you of all people," he said. "I thought—when I came in tonight I thought—"

The woman gave a sigh and there was a soft exhausted gentleness in her voice as she replied, "I don't understand it either. It just seems—well, we'll talk about it later. All you need to remember now is that you came home on the usual train. And came straight home."

"Yes," he said, "the usual train."

"And after tea we're all going to play cards—just as usual."

"Beggar-my-neighbor!" the child cried. "All of us—Daddy too?"

Her mother nodded. "But one game only, remember, then off to bed with you and no fuss about it. Promise?"

The child promised eagerly. To have her father joining in the game, instead of hiding himself behind the evening newspaper, far from being usual, was an astonishing privilege, which she was more than ready to earn by going to bed in mouse-like silence. Yet even as she was giving her promise, she started asking herself how it was possible for her mother to believe that her father had returned from work on the usual train, when in fact he had been standing in the doorway of his home at the very time when the lights of his train could be seen going by from the window upstairs. That was a very puzzling thing to think about.

They played the one game of beggar-my-neighbor which, luckily for the child, was a long one, then she obediently went upstairs. During the game her parents had both been quiet, neither of them responding at all when for a little while Meg had grown uproarious, and sometimes they had spoken to one another strangely. Yet there had been something in the way that they had looked at each other, and at her, which had made her feel that for that one evening they were all curiously at peace.

It was a feeling that she had had too seldom lately, though she realized this only as it came to her again, reminding her of something past, something lost, and though she could not recall exactly when she had known it better, she recognized it instantly as sweetly, reassuringly familiar.

When she woke in the morning, she blinked in surprise at the

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brilliance of the light in her room. It was as dazzling as on a summer morning, though the brightness reflected on the ceiling over her bed had a tinge of blue in it that was not like summer sunshine.

Jumping out of bed, she ran to the window and saw, under a tranquil blue sky, the white covering on the garden and the common and on the bare branches of trees. She saw too how the boughs of the evergreen bushes in the garden were weighed down by their load and how the path to the gate had quite disappeared.

As she looked, she saw her father come out of the house. He was wearing gumboots and a duffle-coat and was carrying a shovel, with which he started to clear the snow from the path. So, after all, he had not gone to the office. He dug fiercely, as if he were in a great hurry, yet in spite of this, he kept stopping and straightening his back to gaze across the common at Mr. Ferguson's house.

Mr. Ferguson, the child could see, had visitors. It seemed early in the day to be paying visits, yet a lot of people must have come to call on him, because there were several cars drawn up outside his house.

She had her breakfast alone with her mother, while her father went on working in the snow. Her mother looked very tired this morning. Her face seemed to have grown thin in the night, her fine clear skin to have shrunk against the bone behind it.

"Isn't Daddy going to have any breakfast?" the child asked, as she spooned up her porridge.

"He's had all he wants," her mother said.

"Isn't he going to the office?"

"Not yet."

"Isn't he well?"

"No—no, he isn't very well."

"Why doesn't he go to bed then?"

"He isn't ill enough for that."

The sound of the vacuum cleaner, operated by Mrs. Nettle in one of the bedrooms, stopped abruptly and Mrs. Nettle's heavy footsteps came pounding down the stairs. She put her head into the dining room.

"Looks as if some of them are coming here now, Mrs. Ellis," she said. "I saw them from the window."

The younger woman looked at her vacantly and said nothing.

"They'll be wanting to ask if you saw or heard anything, I suppose," Mrs. Nettle said, "like they did with us. He isn't bad, the Inspector, he was quite polite. He won't worry you."

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The child twisted in her chair to look out of the window and see who was coming, but she could not see beyond the laurel hedge.

Her mother got up, putting both hands on the table and leaning on them, as if her legs for a moment had become too weak to carry her, then she walked slowly out of the room. The child dropped her spoon and was going to jump off her chair and run after her, when Mrs. Nettle said sharply, "Now then, you get on with your breakfast and don't go sticking your nose into everyone's business."

"But, Mrs. Nettle, I want to know who it is," the child said.

"It's no one you know," Mrs. Nettle said and went out and shut the door.

Meg waited for a moment, then got down from her chair, walked softly across the room, turned the doorknob, quietly opened the door a few inches, and peeped out.

Through the door opposite, which was wide-open, she saw her father and mother in the garden, standing side by side on the cleared path, her mother's arm through her father's, while two men approached them from the gate. Listening eagerly, Meg heard her father say that it was a terrible thing that had happened, and heard her mother add that they had learned about it from the postman and had at once decided that her husband should stay at home that morning, in case he could give assistance of any kind. Then they all turned toward the house and the child, swiftly closing the dining-room door, ran back to her place at the table and went on hastily eating her cooling porridge.

A few minutes later Mrs. Nettle returned to the dining room, bringing Meg a boiled egg. Unexpectedly she sat down at the table with her, watching her with a distressed and wondering stare, as if she had just become a problem about which the old woman had to make up her mind.

"Isn't Mummy going to finish her breakfast?" Meg asked presently.

"Yes, when the gentlemen have gone," Mrs. Nettle answered.

"What have they come for?"

"Now didn't I tell you to mind your own business?"

Meg wriggled in exasperation. "But Daddy said something terrible's happened. What's happened, Mrs. Nettle?"

The old woman gave a sigh and said, "Well, for sure you'll hear about it, I suppose. There's been an accident, love."

"A motor accident?"

"No, a different kind of accident."

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"In the snow? Did Mr. Ferguson fall down and hurt himself?" But before Mrs. Nettle could reply, Meg went on, "D'you know snow can blow straight through a window, even when it's shut? I didn't know that before, did you? I stood in front of the landing window and snow was blowing right into my face. I opened my mouth wide and the snow came into it and tasted just like ice cream, only it didn't exactly taste at all. And the window was shut all the time."

"Oh, that window," Mrs. Nettle said. "It fits that badly, it always does that when there's a strong wind that side of the house. The snow wasn't coming through the glass."

"But I *saw* it, Mrs. Nettle."

"There's lots of things people think they see what they don't," Mrs. Nettle said, "and if they'd talk less about what they see, even when they *have* seen it, there'd be less damage done."

Before the child could puzzle this out, the door opened and her father, her mother, and the two strange men came into the room.

Mrs. Nettle got to her feet, but instead of leaving the room, as Meg expected, she went to stand behind her, and in passing, let her hand rest gently on Meg's shoulder. It was as if she thought the child needed reassurance and did not trust anyone else there to give it to her.

Meg's mother spoke to her. "This gentleman wants to ask you something, darling. He thinks perhaps you can tell him something he wants to know."

Angrily Mrs. Nettle exclaimed, "How can she tell him anything? She doesn't even understand—"

"Please," Meg's father said. He lifted a hand to check her.

"She can answer this question, I'm sure," one of the strange men said, smiling at the child as he came toward her. His breath smelled strongly of tobacco. He was a big man, with smooth ruddy skin and gray hair.

"It's a very easy question," he said, "nothing to worry about at all. You don't mind answering it, do you, my dear?"

She looked at her mother, then at her father, then back at the big man.

"No," she said uncertainly.

"Well now, you remember you were in the other room yesterday afternoon, and you went to look out of the window?"

"Yes."

"What did you see?"

She again searched the faces of everyone else in the room before

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she committed herself to an answer.

"The snow," she said.

"Ah," he said, "the snow. You like snow, eh?"

"I—I don't know."

"Now that's queer, a little girl not knowing what she likes and what she doesn't," he said. "Most of the little girls I know, know much too much about it."

"But I never saw snow before in my whole life," she explained.

"Well, well!" he said. "So you were very excited, I expect. And you went to the window to watch the snow falling."

"Yes."

"And what else did you see?"

She returned his steady, smiling look warily. She knew at once that this was the question that he really wanted her to answer and that the other questions about the snow had not meant anything. But this knowledge confused her, so that she could not remember anything at all of what she had seen from the window.

At length she said, "I didn't see anything."

"What, nothing at all?"

"Just tell the Inspector what you told me," her mother prompted her.

"Don't you remember what you told me you saw?"

Breathing heavily, Meg screwed up her forehead and twisted about in her chair.

"I saw the lights in Mr. Ferguson's house," she said.

"The lights? Yes, and then?" the big man asked.

"I saw them go out and I said—I said to Mummy, Mr. Ferguson's going for a walk in the snow."

"That's fine, that's just fine," he said. "Now I don't suppose you could help me a lot more by telling me when this happened."

Her mother answered for her, "I'm afraid she isn't very good at telling the time yet, Inspector. But Mrs. Nettle might be able to tell you that."

He looked up at the old woman. "You were here?"

"I was," she said sourly.

"And do you know what time it was when the little girl saw the lights go out?"

"Is that when—when it happened?" she asked.

"Seems likely," he said. "Most of the curtains weren't drawn, only the bedroom curtains, and he must have been afraid someone could see in."

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"Well, it was about five then, because it was just before I went home," Mrs. Nettle said, "and I go home about quarter past."

"Thanks," he said. "Thank you very much." He looked round and addressed them all. "I'm sorry to have troubled you, but you understand we have to ask these questions. And we'll have to corroborate that you came home on the five thirty, Mr. Ellis, as you said. That's just routine, of course."

The child's parents nodded silently.

The big man looked down at the child.

"I expect you saw your father come home, didn't you, young lady? But you wouldn't know just when it was, if you aren't very clever at telling the time yet."

"Oh, I do," she said.

She looked up into her father's face as she said it. Even before she saw the sudden panic in his eyes she knew that she was on dangerous ground. But she had confidence in herself, because, although she had not understood it at the time, she had learned her lesson well the evening before, and she knew that she could repeat it accurately.

"I know just when it was," she said, "because I saw his train come in. I watched it from the landing window upstairs, like I always do—well, almost always. And then—then—" She choked with the effort to be clear, to make no mistake. Apart from her own high voice, stumbling on, there was an extraordinary silence in the room. "Then of course he came home, like he always does, and I—I met him at the door. And he came in looking like a snowman!"

With the last sentence she burst out laughing. This was not only because she had suddenly remembered vividly how funny it had been not to recognize her father, and actually be frightened of him. More than that, it was because of the relief of being able to tell the easy truth again, instead of the incomprehensible, memorized lie.

The big man smiled at her again. "A snowman?" he said.

"Yes, he had snow on his eyebrows and his mustache and all down him," she said.

"That must have looked funny." The Inspector turned toward the door.

The child's father, smiling a little himself, though his manner was very grave, followed the detective out of the room and opened the front door. Beyond it, in the garden, the snow glittered in the calm, brilliant sunshine.

The big man turned up the collar of his coat. "She'll have a fine

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time, mucking about with the first snow she's seen in her long life, eh? And it's fine and dry for her too, now that the wind's dropped . . . "

He paused. For a moment his face looked oddly empty and stupid, as if he had had a shock. "That north wind . . . And you came in looking like a snowman, Mr. Ellis? But if you'd been coming from the station in that north wind, you'd have had the snow behind you and you wouldn't have looked like a snowman to your daughter till you turned your back on her. You'd have looked like a snowman only if you'd been coming from the opposite direction—*from across the common,* Mr. Ellis! And it could be, after all, that there's more truth than you've both been telling me in the stories I've heard about your wife and Mr. Ferguson."

The child saw her father sway where he stood. She heard her mother scream. Then she felt Mrs. Nettle's arms about her and found her face firmly held against Mrs. Nettle's bosom, so that she could not see what else was happening. Everyone in the hall seemed to be talking or shouting at the same time, while Mrs. Nettle led Meg away to the kitchen, muttering in her ear, "God help you, my poor love, God help you!"

"Q"

NEXT MONTH . . .

14 ***NEW*** stories—including

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Dr. Sam Hawthorne)

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a *NEW* Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Once again Rand, the former Double-C man, the former head of the Department of Concealed Communications, is persuaded to return to action. This time both the British and the Russians desperately need Rand's help. One member after another of the old Tsar Network is being murdered by Taz, and only Rand is believed capable of outwitting his old enemy . . .

THE SPY WHO CAME BACK FROM THE DEAD

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"No," Rand repeated, pacing the living-room floor with an after-dinner brandy in his hand while his wife Leila watched from the sofa next to Hastings. "Damn it, every time you come out here for dinner it's some new intrigue! I retired from Double-C to get away from all that. The last time you even involved Leila in some dangerous business. That's the end of it. No more! She's teaching and I'm writing and we're quite peaceful here in the country."

"At least give me an opportunity to—"

But Rand cut him off. "No! We'll welcome you as a friend any time you come, but there's to be no talk of business, and especially no talk of new assignments for me. In the years since I've retired I've been almost as busy as I was before!"

"Oh, that's hardly the case, Rand," Hastings protested. "You have your days free to work on your memoirs, and Leila teaches at the University. It's a perfect existence, really, and if I show up once in six months to disrupt things a bit you should be thankful the British government still has such a high regard for your talents."

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"They used my talents for a good many years, but that's over now. I don't even do the cipher puzzles in the Sunday paper any more."

"Still, those were great days with you in London and Taz in Moscow, during the depths of the Cold War."

"The world changed," Rand reminded him. "Now we have arms limitation treaties with the Russians."

"Taz was certainly a worthy opponent."

"He was," Rand agreed. "He retired too, remember—but the Russians talked him into coming back for one more assignment. He ended up dead when he set off a bomb in a car."

Hastings nodded. "Geneva, Switzerland, 1975. I remember it very well. You retired shortly after that."

"Taz chose to die, and kill a couple of his Russian comrades, rather than kill me and some other people." Rand stared into his brandy glass. "After that I decided it was time to get out of the business. And of course Leila helped with that decision."

"What would you say if I told you Taz was still alive?"

"That's impossible! I saw the body!"

"Nevertheless, he seems to have returned from the dead, if he was ever really among them."

"Impossible!" Rand repeated, but with less assurance. Was anything really impossible in the shadowy underworld of espionage? "If he's back from the dead what's he been up to?"

"Killing people," Hastings answered. "The Russians want our help in finding him."

"Our help?"

"Exactly. And that's why we need you, Rand. You knew him. He even showed some admiration for you in his later days. If anyone can find him and bring him out of hiding, it's you."

"The man is dead, Hastings!" Rand insisted.

"Just try for a moment accepting the fact that he might not be. That he's active and causing trouble for both sides now. Would that be enough to tempt you back?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly.

"Would you at least meet with someone?"

"Who?" Rand asked.

"A Russian named Cornelius. At least that's his code name. He'll be on the Holyhead to Dublin ferry tomorrow morning."

Rand thought about it for a long time. Finally he turned to Leila and asked, "Should I do it?"

"Will you be happy if you don't?"

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Rand took the early train from London to Holyhead and then strode across the station and a little outer courtyard to the adjoining ferry dock. He was just in time to board the last morning ferry to Dublin—a three-hour journey across the Irish Sea in a modern ship that carried cars as well as passengers and offered all the comforts of a night at the club.

Rand sat for a time in the plush armchair of the first-class section, until the ship was clear of the docks and well out to sea. Then he went for a casual stroll around the deck. Even in late June the breeze on the Irish Sea could be brisk and chilling, and he saw at once that he was the only passenger who'd ventured out. Next he checked the darkened room where television or movies could be viewed, but only a few children were in there. Two decks below, the large restaurant had a good noonday crowd, but no one that he sought.

Finally, in the bar and lounge on the deck above the restaurant, his search was rewarded. He purchased a beer from the Irish bartender and carried it over to one of the little round cocktail tables bolted to the floor. A man wearing a red plaid vest and a gray suit sat reading a copy of the latest John LeCarré novel. He glanced up as Rand asked, "Could I share this table?"

"Certainly, old chap." The words were English, but the accent was not quite perfect. Rand knew he had found his man.

"Nice crossing today."

"It is that," the man agreed.

"How's the book?"

"Oh, you know these spy things. Quite far-fetched."

"I'd have thought differently. I knew a man once who was in the business."

Rand's table companion closed the book and glanced casually around the bar. No one was close enough to overhear their conversation. "You would be Rand?" he asked.

"Yes. And you're Cornelius?"

"As good a name as any," he replied. He was a tall slim man whose gaunt features reminded Rand of the villains in the old war movies. He looked, in truth, more German than Russian.

"You wanted to see me?"

"My superiors suggested you could help." He dropped his gaze to the bulging briefcase that served Rand as an overnight bag.

Reading his thoughts, Rand said, "There is no recording device. I'll open it if you want."

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"Not necessary. We must trust one another."

Rand dropped his voice another notch, keeping his expression casual.

"Taz is dead. I saw the body myself," he said firmly.

"In an explosion many things are possible. A last-minute substitution, for example. The body was badly burned?"

"Yes," Rand admitted. "But what is your evidence that he's alive?"

Cornelius stared at his drink. "Three of our best field agents have been killed during the past two months. Their throats were cut. The first lived long enough to write Taz's name in Russian on his desktop at our embassy in Vienna. He used his own blood to do it."

"Just *Taz*, nothing more?"

"Nothing more. After that Taz's old Moscow office received a letter from him."

Rand's interest perked. "A letter?"

"Typewritten. Here's a translation of it."

Rand read the brief note: *The body in Vienna was only the first. The Tsar Network betrayed the cause of the Revolution and all its members must die. I have come back to do this and will not be stopped. Taz.*

"What is the Tsar Network?" Rand asked.

He hesitated at first, as if weighing how much to tell. Then he said, "The Tsar Network operated in the early 1960s, using seven agents who were known to each other only by the names of the last seven Tsars of Imperial Russia. It operated in various European cities with the aim of gaining intelligence regarding NATO military strength. The network collapsed in 1965 when one of its key agents, Tsar Paul, was captured and killed by West German intelligence agents. We didn't know how much Paul told before he died, so the network was immediately shut down and the surviving six agents shifted to other assignments."

"I never heard Paul referred to as a Tsar," said Rand, who knew something of Russian history.

"The term is interchangeable with Emperor. Most Russian rulers called themselves Emperor, though the final one, Nicholas II, prefered the older, more Russian, title of Tsar. In the network all seven agents used Tsar. There were Nicholas II, Alexander III, Alexander II, Nicholas I, Alexander I, Paul, and Catherine the Great."

"A woman?"

"Yes. One woman and six men. With the death of Paul five men were left alive."

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"Who was the first man to have his throat slit?"

"Alexander II, in Vienna."

"Tell me about him."

"There is little to tell. He was an exceptional agent, especially in his command of the English language. He had a British mother and it was really his native tongue. They said back in Moscow he even thought in English. He was in deep cover with the NATO forces—a mole, to use LeCarré's term." He gestured toward the book on the table. "Personally, I thought he should have remained where he was, but when Paul was killed the people in Moscow panicked. The entire network was shut down and Alexander II was shifted to Vienna—under another designation, of course."

"You said three agents had been killed."

Cornelius nodded. "A few weeks after that letter arrived, Nicholas I died in Madrid. Again, the throat was cut."

"Had he been warned of the letter from Taz?"

"Not directly. It was not taken too seriously at first. After Nicholas I died, of course, the others were warned. But it did no good. Alexander I was killed in Amsterdam last week."

"Throat cut?"

"Yes. Exactly like the others."

"Did the second or third victims live long enough to leave a message?"

"No."

Rand leaned back in his chair. "Why does Moscow want my help? We're still something like enemies, you know."

Cornelius nodded. "I agree, but the decision was not mine to make. I am simply following instructions. The feeling seems to be that you knew Taz, were even friendly with him for a time. Friendly enemies of a sort. Moscow knows all too well how you managed to anticipate his movements on more than one occasion. They hope you can do it again. Three members of the Tsar Network are still alive. We want to keep them alive."

"Maybe there's another reason too," Rand speculated. "Like Taz, I'm retired. I won't feel obliged to report everything I learn to British Intelligence." He paused a moment. "And British Intelligence won't feel obliged to make an international incident out of it if you kill me after I find Taz."

"No, no," Cornelius insisted with a shake of his head. "You English always think of killing! You are still fighting the old war. Russia today is content to let time work on its side. I can assure you of your

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personal safety, once Taz is found."

"Have there been any other letters since the first?"

"No letters, but there was a telephone call after the second killing. He phoned the man who had replaced him in Moscow."

"Was it Taz's voice?" For the first time Rand seriously considered the possibility that his old foe could be still alive.

"The man met Taz only once. He couldn't be certain."

"What did the message say?"

"That the Tsar Network had betrayed the Revolution."

"In what way?"

"Mr. Rand, a madman needs no reasons. It seems obvious that Taz is both alive and insane."

Rand considered the courses open to him. "Three members of the Tsar Network remain alive. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Nicholas II, Alexander III, and Catherine the Great."

"Where are they?"

"Nicholas is in Dublin at the moment. I am on my way to see him. We're not certain just where Catherine is. She was in Paris, but she left there ten days ago after receiving our second warning."

"And Alexander III?"

Cornelius bowed his head slightly. "He sits before you, Mr. Rand. I am Alexander III. Or I was, back in those days."

"I see."

"You can understand that I have a personal interest in finding Taz before he succeeds in killing the entire Tsar Network."

"Indeed."

"I hope you will come with me to meet Nicholas."

"I'll come," Rand agreed quietly.

It was not a long drive from the ferry dock to downtown Dublin, and the sun was still high in the afternoon sky when their taxi crossed the River Liffey and drew up in front of the hotel on O'Connell Street. Cornelius paid the driver and said to Rand, "I will not be staying the night, but if you wish to remain for a day or so, this is a fine hotel."

"Thanks. Where do we meet Nicholas?"

Cornelius hesitated again, reluctant to reveal more than was absolutely necessary. "He is a member of the Russian delegation here, employed at our embassy. We won't be going there, though. I'll phone and arrange a meeting elsewhere."

The meeting came two hours later, in a Catholic church only a

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block from the hotel. "They never suspect Communists of meeting in a church," Cornelius said with a chuckle. "It has served me well in many cities."

Rand stood near the back of the church, watching a few people drift in for a visit following their day's work. Some paused by a side altar to drop a coin in a meter and snap on one of the electric vigil lights that glowed in steady rows. A strange leap into the modern age, Rand thought, for a country and a church so deeply rooted in the traditional ways.

Presently Cornelius touched his elbow and went forward to intercept a stout man of medium height with horn-rimmed glasses and slicked-down blond hair. If Cornelius reminded Rand of the villain in an old Nazi film, the man with the code name of Nicholas II looked more like a prosperous American banker.

"Alexander," he said, speaking softly. "It is good to see you again." The name surprised Rand, until he remembered the members of the Tsar Network had known each other only by their code names.

"My old friend, I come in a time of great peril for both of us. You have been warned about Taz?"

"Of course."

"This man is Rand, late of British Intelligence." He added quickly, "Do not fear! He's here to help us. He knew Taz and in fact was present at the explosion that apparently killed him."

Nicholas shifted nervously, glancing about the church. "Taz telephoned me."

"When?" Rand asked.

"Just last evening, at my embassy quarters. He offered to let me live if I would reveal the present locations of Catherine and Alexander. I could not, of course. I did not know them."

"So he threatened to kill you?" Rand studied the man as he spoke, looking for anything unusual. But Nicholas seemed only to be a badly frightened bureaucrat.

"I told him I knew very little about the Tsar Network. I told him I was not worth killing."

"Had you ever spoken to Taz before?"

"No."

Rand turned back to Cornelius. "What was Taz's connection with the Tsar Network?"

"No direct connection, although of course his work with the communications section made him aware of our activities."

"What were those activities?" Rand wanted to know. "What was

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it that Taz could possibly construe as harming the Revolution?"

"Nothing," Nicholas insisted. "Absolutely nothing!"

Cornelius glanced at his watch. "I must catch the last ferry back to Holyhead. Will you be staying, Mr. Rand?"

"If Taz phoned here last night he could be very close. I'll stay, at least for a day or so."

"Very well."

"You're in danger too," Nicholas reminded Cornelius. "He's after you."

Cornelius brushed aside the warning. "Within forty-eight hours I'll be back at my desk in Moscow. I am safer than those of you on foreign soil."

"And Catherine? She is the only other one left alive."

"True," Cornelius admitted. "But I have not seen her in fifteen years."

"She was a beautiful girl then."

"We were all younger. Today we are old and tired—right, Nicholas?"

"You do well in the Kremlin, old friend, while I waste away here in Dublin. When the revolution sweeps across Europe, I hardly think Ireland will be one of its first targets."

They shook hands and Cornelius turned to Rand. "Do what you can for us."

"And if I find Taz?"

"Do what is best."

Then he was gone.

"I must get back to my quarters," the man known as Nicholas said.

Rand handed him a slip of paper. "Here's my phone number at the hotel. If Taz calls again, telephone me at once. Otherwise I'll be in touch tomorrow. Whom should I ask for at the embassy?"

Even then Nicholas was reluctant to reveal his real name. "I will call you, Mr. Rand."

"Be careful."

"If Taz comes for me, he will not have an easy time of it."

Rand left the church first, walking quickly back to his hotel. Indeed, he decided, the world was changing. Who would have thought he'd ever be having a secret meeting with Russian agents in the back of a church, or using his wits to try saving their lives?

These thoughts were still in his mind as he unlocked the room assigned to him and stepped over the threshold. He was hardly

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expecting the beautiful dark-haired woman who came out of the bathroom with a Beretta pistol pointed at his stomach.

Rand smiled and gave a little bow. "Let me guess—you'd be Catherine the Great."

"Your intelligence is only equaled by your bravado, Mr. Rand. Has my fame preceded me?"

"Within the hour I heard a compliment to your beauty, which was certainly justified." He guessed her to be nearing 40, which meant she'd been under 25 in the active days of the Tsar Network. The Russians would have found her of great use in prying NATO secrets from tired middle-aged generals. "Why don't you put away that gun so we can talk?"

"The gun stays, for the moment. I want to know what you're doing in Dublin, Mr. Rand, and why you arrived here in the company of Alexander III. I assume you know that designation since you addressed me as Catherine."

He took a careful step closer. "I do indeed. And I know of the Tsar Network too. A bit of humor, that—with seven Russian agents using code names of dead Russian emperors."

"We were quite serious at the time."

"And quite successful too, I imagine, until Paul fell victim to West German counterintelligence. Tell me something—why is Taz trying to kill you all?"

"I don't believe Taz is." He could see now that her eyes were green. "Taz is dead."

"That's what I've been telling those fools," Rand agreed. "But if Taz isn't killing them, who is?"

"I think you are, Mr. Rand, which is why I'm holding this gun."

"Me! That's insane!"

"Is it? The British would like nothing better than to remove a half-dozen top enemy agents without being blamed for it. This way we fight among ourselves, suspecting each other, while you go about your business. After all, you were present when Taz met his end. You're in the best position to know the body could never be fully identified."

"You know a great deal about me."

"After Tsar folded I was reassigned to Moscow. I worked under Taz in the early '70s, and he told me a great deal about you."

"Then you knew him well."

"Well enough. He had a candid photo of you on his office wall."

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"I never knew that. Did you throw darts at it?"

"No. Taz had a great deal of respect for you."

"And yet you think I'd do something like this? Kill off Russian agents and blame it on him?"

"We are still enemies, Mr. Rand. My eyes are not clouded by SALT treaties and good-will missions."

"Moscow asked for my help. I came out of retirement to find Taz, if he's still alive."

"They asked for you?" She frowned and considered that bit of information. "It's difficult to believe."

"It's difficult for me too. But that's what I'm doing here. Cornelius—the man you know as Alexander—met me on the ferry from Holyhead this morning. Apparently I did so well outwitting Taz in life they think I can do it now that he's dead too." He'd moved close enough to grab the gun from her hand, but he hesitated, waiting for her next words.

"All right," she said, lowering the weapon. "I will take a chance."

"Good! Now suppose we talk about this over a drink."

But she balked at that. "If what you say is true I must be on my way. A moving target is more difficult to hit."

"Certainly you can't think Taz would come after you!"

"Taz, or whoever."

"Anyone could have left that dying message with Taz's name."

"No, anyone couldn't," she said. "That's one reason Moscow is now treating this whole thing so seriously. As I understand it, Paul was writing the message in his blood when they found him. With his throat cut he couldn't speak, and he died before they could help him. But the message was not faked."

"Someone could have impersonated Taz, of course."

"Why impersonate a dead man? Why not simply wear a mask?" She tucked the gun away in her purse. "The killer couldn't have known Paul would live long enough to identify him."

"I don't know the answers," Rand admitted. "But I have more questions. Who knew you were in Paris, and why did you leave so suddenly?"

"Moscow knew where I was, of course. No one else did. When I heard of the last killing in Amsterdam it seemed wise to move on. I could have returned to Moscow, but I knew Nicholas was assigned to our Dublin embassy, so I came here.

"Then you know the true identity of Nicholas, not just his old code name?"

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"I worked in Moscow for many years, you'll remember. We learn such things there."

"You speak English very well."

She smiled. "It was one of the requirements of the Tsar Network. Before we were recruited we had to know the language from A to Z."

"I wish I could say I knew Russian from A to Z."

"That would be difficult, since there is no Z in the Russian alphabet."

"That's right. I remember a fellow who worked in the cipher room with me. When the message came through in Russian he used to say he knew the language from A to three, because—"

The telephone by the bed gave two sharp jingles, startling them both.

Rand picked it up and heard a voice he recognized as belonging to Nicholas. "Taz just phoned me," he said. "Not five minutes ago."

"What did he say?"

"The same as before—that he'd let me live if I told him where the others were. He wants to meet me tonight at ten."

"Where?"

"In the courtyard at Trinity College, near the library."

"Go there, but be careful. I'll try to arrive early and get a look at him. If it is Taz, it's time we put an end to this. Do you have a gun?"

"Yes," Nicholas replied. "I'll be safe enough."

"Get there a few minutes late, so I have time to locate him."

"All right."

Rand hung up and told Catherine about the meeting. "I want to come with you," she said.

"Don't be foolish. You're a target too. Stay here in my room."

"All right," she agreed, much too readily.

He ordered dinner sent up to the room so they wouldn't be seen together. If Taz was on the prowl in Dublin he could be anywhere. Later, as they ate, he asked, "What is Nicholas' real name?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I might need to know, and he wouldn't tell me."

"It is Max Satatov."

"Thank you." He made a note of it.

As he prepared to leave she placed a delicate hand on his arm. "Be careful, Mr. Rand."

Outside the streets were slick and glowing with a light summer

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drizzle that had begun to fall, almost invisibly, and Rand was glad he'd packed a lightweight raincoat. The rain was not heavy enough to seek out a taxi, and he walked quickly south across O'Connell Bridge, then a few blocks to Trinity College. He could feel the sharp stones of the courtyard through his shoes as he passed the gate and crossed in the general direction of the library building. Except for a few summer students he passed in the dark, the college seemed almost deserted. The rain had glistened the stones of the courtyard to reflect the occasional lights from a window, but most was darkness. He wondered how he'd ever find Nicholas or Taz here.

Or would only one be waiting for him?

He moved carefully among the shadows, hoping to spot some movement before he was himself seen. For a quarter of an hour there was nothing except the occasional passage of students on their way back from the library. Then, as he pressed his digital watch to read the time as 10:06, he heard a low groan from the shadows of a nearby building. He stepped out cautiously, ready for a sudden attack, and his eyes made out the figure of a man supporting himself with one outstretched arm against the building's wall.

Rand move closer and saw the dim features of Nicholas. The man tried to speak, and then Rand saw the blood welling up from beneath his chin. Before Rand could reach him, Nicholas collapsed to the ground.

Rand turned him over and felt for a pulse, but it was too late. Taz had claimed a fourth member of the Tsar Network.

There was a sound of movement farther into the shadows of the building, and Rand moved quickly. His searching hands encountered the sleek plastic of a raincoat and he grappled with the other figure until a little screech of pain brought recognition.

"Catherine!"

"God, Rand, you almost killed me!"

"I told you to wait in the room."

"I get nervous waiting. What's happened here?"

"Nicholas is dead. His throat was cut, not moments ago."

She took a frightened step backward and almost stumbled over the body. "Then Taz must be here!"

"Perhaps. An hour ago you weren't so sure he was alive."

"But he phoned Nicholas!"

"Or else Nicholas made up the story."

"Why would he do that?"

"Suppose Nicholas and some other member of the old Tsar Net-

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work plotted the murders together. Suppose getting me here tonight was just another stunt to indicate Taz was alive. And then suppose Nicholas was double-crossed and killed by his partner."

"You think I killed him?"

"It's certainly possible."

"But why? Why would I kill any of them?"

He couldn't see her eyes in the dark, but he remembered how green they were. "I think it all goes back to the first one to die—Tsar Paul, fifteen years ago. Who betrayed Paul to the West Germans, Catherine?"

"I—I don't know."

"It was a member of the network, wasn't it? Is that why Taz thought you all had to die, because one of you was a traitor?"

"I didn't kill anyone. I don't know what happened to Paul. I don't—"

Something clattered against the cobblestone pavement and Rand turned, the misty rain on his face. He froze as he saw the tall figure step from the shadows not 20 feet away. Instinctively he placed his body between Catherine and the newcomer.

"Good evening, Mr. Rand," a voice said, thick with accent. Rand couldn't remember if he'd ever heard it before.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"We last met in Switzerland, some years ago."

"Taz?"

The figure moved a bit but kept to the shadows. "I did not die in that explosion, though it was a very near thing. I've come back now, Mr. Rand—back from the dead, as they say."

"You killed Nicholas and the others?"

"I killed them, yes. They didn't deserve to live. It is my good fortune that Catherine has come here too. Now I can make an end to this business."

He moved then, and Rand saw the glint of light reflected off the knife blade. There was no time to reach his own gun and he knew the blade would strike him down on its way to Catherine's throat. He knew, and was frozen there seconds from death suddenly remembering a sentence he'd never finished.

". . .he knew the language from A to three, because in Russian the symbol for Z looks just like a 3."

"You're not Taz!" he shouted as the knifer lunged.

And behind him Catherine the Great stepped into the shimmering reflected light and fired three quick shots with her little Beretta.

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The figure with the knife staggered, half turned, and toppled to the wet stones.

It wasn't Taz.

It was Cornelius.

Rand left the bodies there and took Catherine with him on the next ferry back to Holyhead. There was no point in involving the Irish police in a complicated story they'd never understand. He would make his report to Hastings, for transmission to the Russians, and they could carry on as they pleased.

Seated across from Catherine on the ferry, Rand said, "You have to realize the backwards nature of the thing. Cornelius never meant to impersonate Taz at the beginning—I'm sure of that. He was forced into it, to cover up the real meaning of the first victim's dying message."

"Real meaning? But the man wrote TAZ in his own blood!"

"Not exactly. Alexander II was killed in the Russian embassy in Vienna, so we can safely assume his body was found by Russians. They reported, and I was told, that the dying man wrote Taz's name *in Russian!* But consider the facts. The members of the Tsar network were recruited for their expertise in English, and the first victim actually had it as a native tongue thanks to a British mother. It was said he thought in English. So it's more likely his dying message was written in English rather than Russian."

"Of course!" she agreed readily. "There is no Z in the Russian alphabet! TAZ would be written TA3 in Russian."

"Exactly. The Russian symbol for Z looks exactly like the number 3. If the dying man wrote in English, which I've shown is likely, then he was writing TA3 and not the name of the dead Russian."

"TA3."

"A dying man's quick abbreviation of *Tsar Alexander III,* the only name by which he'd ever known Cornelius."

"But what about the letter and phone calls from Taz?"

"Cornelius realized the meaning of the dying message at once, naturally, but when the people in Moscow mistook it for a reference to the dead Taz he strengthened the theory by writing that letter. The phone calls, carefully placed to people not familiar with Taz's voice, did the same. As long as they were thinking about Taz, they weren't looking for another meaning to TA3."

"He would have killed me too."

"Yes, he would have. Both of us. Actually what puzzled me from

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the beginning was how Taz could know the cities these old agents were working in. And even more puzzling, how he could get close enough to cut their throats even after they'd been warned. Cornelius held an important Moscow post, with access to that information. And even men on their guard against Taz relaxed when they saw it was him—their old comrade from the Tsar Network. He even got to Nicholas, who was armed and expecting an attack."

Catherine thought of something. "What did you do with my Beretta?"

"Left it in Nicholas' hand. If the police think they killed each other, so much the better."

"Why did Cornelius do it?"

"Moscow sent him to make contact with me, so he was high up in the chain of command. I suspect he was in line for an even bigger position, and he felt the need to remove any trace of a past indiscretion. I think Cornelius betrayed Paul to the West Germans fifteen years ago. Either that or some bungle of his caused Paul's arrest. In any case, he had to silence the witnesses, the members of the old Tsar Network, before he'd be safe in his new position."

"And you came into it only because of Taz? Because you wanted a chance to battle him again?"

"No," Rand answered, remembering the old Russian's face the last time they'd met. "I wanted a chance to prove him innocent of these murders."

At Holyhead they shook hands rather formally before parting, and Catherine the Great said, "Perhaps we'll meet again."

Rand answered with a smile. "But if we do, we'll probably be enemies."

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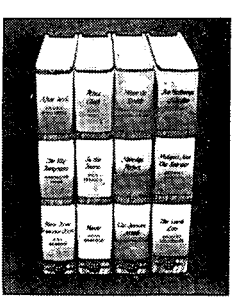

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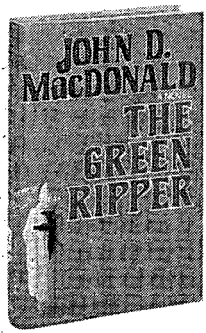

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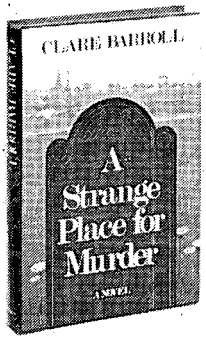

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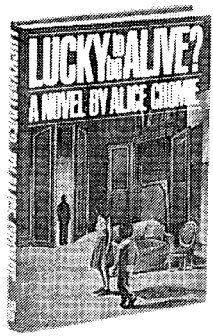

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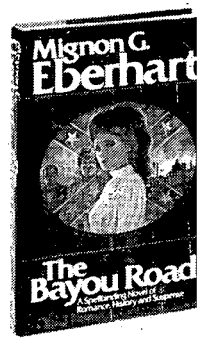

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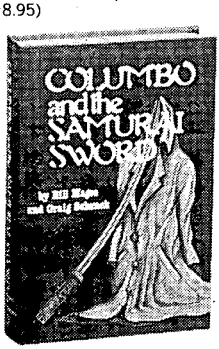

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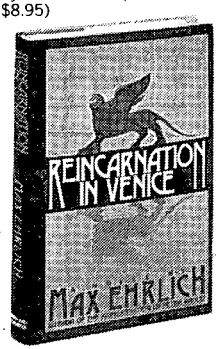

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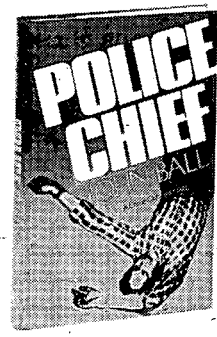

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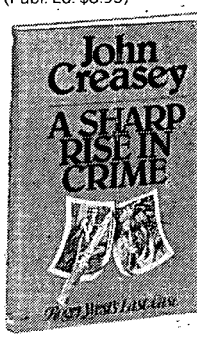

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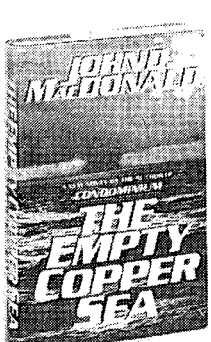

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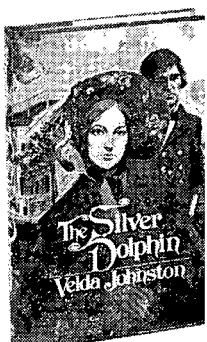

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